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In leaps, like goats climbing the terraced hills;
another fig bursts on the tree; the olives
surrender another cache of livid shadow.
Cicadas transpose their note to a higher key.
As if the ear were the most material sense,
they sing us back to flesh and bone, the steep
rocky quarter acre where we happen to live.

But the eye is aethereal, that watches over
the tranquil cool Aegean, mantle of blue
woven east and west with the stitch of wind.
We see beyond our country into another,
familiar, never attained, where scattered islands
gather like the dream's immortal children.

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The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

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YVES BONNEFOY

Bennett Award Acceptance Speech, 1988

MES AMIS,

Je voudrais vous dire d'abord toute ma reconnaissance pour cette attribution du Bennett Award, que je ressens comme un grand honneur, et un encouragement. Rien ne vaut plus pour un écrivain que le sentiment que ce qu'il écrit a du sens pour d'autres que lui, et ce réconfort est plus grand encore quand ces autres-là sont des écrivains, des critiques que lui-même admire et respecte.

Mais j'ajouterai aussitôt que je ne puis recevoir cette distinction sans comprendre qu'à travers moi elle va à la poésie française contemporaine, au moins à tout un aspect de celle-ci; ce qui fait que c'est la question des relations de la civilisation américaine et de la France qui me revient à l'esprit, d'une façon que je voudrais évoquer, très brièvement, à partir de mon expérience propre.

En un mot: en matière de poésie, peu de rencontres ont compté pour moi autant que celle des Etats-Unis. Je viens dans votre pays depuis trente ans, j'en ai visité nombre de régions, j'ai séjourné dans beaucoup de ses universités, je m'y suis lié à des écrivains, à des peintres, j'y ai même associé ma vie familiale—je le connais donc assez bien, si même je ne maîtriserai jamais la redoutable phonétique de sa langue. Mais ce n'est pas comme conséquence de cette suite d'événements de ma vie que mon attachement est si fort, c'est à cause d'une dimension de la société américaine, perceptible au premier regard (ou presque), et qui me paraît, oui, je reprends ce mot, poétique, et riche d'enseignements sur ce que doit être la poésie. Dimension d'ouverture au monde, en effet, capacité d'adhésion hardie à ce qui est, accueil simultané de l'intensité de la vie urbaine et de la beauté mystérieuse de la nature: c'est cette qualité essentiellement lyrique qui constitute le meilleur, me semble-t-il, autant que le plus spécifique, de la conscience américaine, et c'est donc elle qui est au coeur de sa création poétique, ce qui est un grand exemple, dans une époque où la poésie s'affaiblit trop souvent à ne se croire ou ne se vouloir que simple remuement du langage.

Et c'est d'ailleurs ce même sentiment de la primauté, dans l'esprit, de la parole du monde qui oriente aussi, aujourd'hui, le plus vif de la poésie en France, mais c'est d'une façon différente de la pratique d'ici—différente et, dirai-je même, complémentaire, ce qui peut expliquer pourquoi j'ai toujours ressenti l'attrait de votre culture. Le lyrisme français, en tout cas celui qui a valeur à mes yeux, ne va pas aisément à la variété profuse, polyphonique, des formes de l'existence, il se voue plus volontiers à l'intimité d'un seul lieu, d'une

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MY FRIENDS,

I would like first of all to tell you how deeply I appreciate being chosen for the Bennett Award, which I receive as a great honor and an encouragement. A writer values nothing so much as the knowledge that what he writes has meaning for others, and when those others are writers and critics whom he himself admires and respects, such knowledge is all the more comforting.

But I hasten to add that I cannot accept this honor without taking it to be a distinction conferred, through me, on contemporary French poetry, or on one entire aspect of contemporary French poetry. I have in mind the question of relations between France and American civilization, and I wish very briefly to address this question in light of my own experience.

Where poetry is concerned, my encounter with the United States has been more important for me than almost any other. I have been coming to your country for thirty years, I have visited many regions, I have stayed at many universities, I have formed bonds of friendship with writers and painters, I have even linked my family life to it—so I know it rather well, even if I shall never overcome the formidable difficulties of English pronunciation. But this sequence of events does not explain my strong attachment. What does is a dimension of American society that reveals itself at first glance, that strikes me as—and yes, I mark this word—as poetic, as fraught with lessons on what poetry must be. This dimension resides in America's openness to the world, its capacity for bold commitment to what's out there, in a disposition to welcome both the intensity of urban life and the mysterious beauty of nature: it is this essentially lyrical quality that constitutes what's best and most idiosyncratic about the American sensibility, and it is therefore the quality we find at the heart of its poetic creation. This sets a great example for an age in which poetry lacks the strength or will to conceive of itself as something other than mere wordplay.

The same conviction that the world's voice is of sovereign importance to the mind also imbues what's most vital in French poetry today, although poetic practice shapes it differently. That the difference happens to be a complementary one may explain why I have always found your culture so attractive. French lyricism of the kind I value does not easily accommodate the profuse, polyphonic variety of the forms of existence. It would sooner dwell on the intimacy of a single place, of a single thing, on some narrow but deep situation

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seule chose, situation étroite mais profonde dont il fait le levier qui renversera la masse d'images pauvres et de valeurs factices qui tend à nous étouffer. Et c'est là aussi une expérience essentielle, universellement méditable. Mais en se resserrant ainsi, notre poésie risque de n'être plus que rêverie pastorale. D'où son besoin de contact avec des oeuvres comme les vôtres, qui savent accueillir le "brave new world" même chez des auteurs aussi singuliers et secrets que Melville ou Wallace Stevens.

On m'a souvent demandé: Comment se fait-il, puisque vous avez vécu aux Etats-Unis pendant, au total, des années, que vous n'ayez rien écrit à leur sujet?

Je pourrais répondre que je connais trop bien quelques-uns des aspects de la civilisation américaine pour ne pas sourire des simplifications et des distorsions qui dénaturent les récits hâtifs que l'on en fait. Je m'en voudrais de tomber dans la même sorte de faute.

Mais la vraie question n'est pas là. Les Etats-Unis n'ont jamais été pour moi un *object*, que l'on peut envisager de décrire par l'acte d'une mimésis qui se doit d'en rester distincte. Ils sont une *présence* qui, comme telle, se dérobe au savoir mais, en retour, renaît au plus profond de qui l'interroge et, pour peu qu'il ne cherche pas à la dire, parle, alors, bien qu'obscurément, dans sa voix même. L'Amérique est une des composantes de ce que je suis, et de ce fait elle n'a de place, en mon écriture, qu'à son amont, là où commence le travail partiellement inconscient qui aboutit au poème.

C'est à Williamstown, Massachusetts, en marchant dans Hopkins Forest au cours d'un automne qui devenait un hiver, que j'ai ébauché une des parties de mon dernier livre de poésie, *Ce qui fut sans lumière*. Or, ces pages portent sur la vérité, sur l'enseignement de la neige, laquelle est de nombre de lieux terrestre, et peut prendre sens pour toute vie. Mais je ne les aurais jamais écrites sous la forme qui est la leur maintenant, et qui est pour moi signifiante, si en ces mois ne s'était posée sur món épaule la main méditative de cette civilisation qui me montrait—à travers la neige, si je puis dire—les admirables maisons de bois léger de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, riches des souvenirs de la poésie transcendentaliste, mais aussi l'étincellement au loin d'une grande route qui disparaît parmi les collines. C'était au crépuscule, la lumière des phares se mêlait à celle du ciel. Quant à ces bois, ils avaient été presque rouges, mais ils devenaient "dark and deep," comme vous savez qu'on a dit. J'aimais que ces voitures puissent rouler longtemps dans leur solitude, traçant de leurs feux mouvants une sorte encore de signe. Il me semblait que c'était là comme une constellation de plus, dans la neige. Il me semblait que les conducteurs n'avaient pas tout à fait oublié peut-être "whose woods these are," à qui sont ces bois, dans la nuit.

The above comments were made by Yves Bonnefoy upon being presented with The Hudson Review's 1988 Bennett Award at a dinner in New York on November 1, 1988.

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which it uses as a lever for overturning the mass of poor images and factitious values that stifles us. That, too, is an essential experience, available to every contemplative spirit. But in thus girdling itself, our poetry runs the risk of settling into pastoral reverie. It needs contact with works like yours, which welcome the brave new world, even in authors as singular and secret as Melville or Wallace Stevens.

I have often been asked why it is that I've written nothing about the country in which I've lived on and off for years. I could answer by saying that in some respects I'm too familiar with American civilization not to smile at the simplifications and distortions that mar journals written on the fly. I would reproach myself for adding to their number.

But that's not the real issue. This country has never been for me an object to be evoked through some mimetic act that would necessarily require distance. It is, rather, a presence that eludes cognition but, in return, springs to life deep within the questioner who, though he doesn't seek to articulate it, finds it speaking, however obscurely, through his very voice. America is a constituent part of what I am, and for this reason, has no place in my writing except at its source, where the partly unconscious work that generates a poem begins.

It was in Williamstown, Massachussetts, while taking walks through Hopkins Forest as autumn turned wintry that I sketched out one part of my last book of poems, *Ce qui fut sans lumière*. Now, these pages bear upon the truth, upon the instruction offered by snow, which we can experience in many different lands, and which can acquire meaning for every life. But I would never have written them in their present form, and I consider form significant, if during those months I had not felt on my shoulder the meditative hands of this civilization which showed me—through snow, so to speak—the admirable frame houses that hoard memories of transcendentalist poetry, but also the distant glitter of a highway weaving among the hills. It was dusk; headlights merged with the light of the sky. Woods that verged on red had become "dark and deep," as Frost once put it. I liked the fact that the cars could run for a long time in solitude and, with their moving lights, trace yet another kind of sign. It seemed to me that it was one more constellation in the snow. It seemed to me that the drivers had perhaps not completely forgotten what Frost meant when he wrote "whose woods these are," that they had not completely forgotten whose woods these are, in the night.

[*Translated from the French by Frederick Brown*]

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Comment:

Letter from Beijing

DEAR H,

You can go bowling in Beijing nowadays. There's even a word for it in Chinese—Bao Ling—a phoneticization that translates roughly as "maintaining age." You perform this odd form of age maintenance at the Bowling Center of the Lido Hotel, now the Holiday Inn-Lido Hotel, on Jichang Road. The place is often crowded with prosperous locals, decked out in their rented rubber-soled shoes and Hong Kong polo shirts open at the neck. Sitting in a molded plastic seat, watching a bowler contort this way and that to guide a just-thrown ball into the proper path, you can almost imagine yourself at the 9W lanes in Englewood, New Jersey—or anywhere else, for that matter. China is just now reaching that level of prosperity at which it can afford to build those anonymous, interchangeable non-places we First-Worlders are so fond of: shopping malls, modern airports, and Kentucky Fried Chickens, complete with chrome and plastic and hanging plants. It takes money to hide the fact that a place is in China, and the Chinese (financed by their cooperative friends in Hong Kong and the West) are increasingly willing to spend it.

Bowling alleys notwithstanding, however, this is still China, and the view of it from our tiny dormitory room in the Beijing Language Institute, where my wife and I are studying Chinese, is not quite the same as that from the Holiday Inn compound. From our suburban campus we see another China: stringy black smoke rising above the tower of a coal-powered generating plant, acres and acres of decrepit new housing developments gobbling up the farmland, the top of an old pagoda somewhere above Beijing University. We shop in a market where you can buy traditional embroidery, Sony Walkman knockoffs, and fruit too bruised to eat. We dine in a cafeteria that may or may not pose a hepatitis threat. This China is a poor and haphazardly developed place; it's the China that Deng Xiaoping and his reformers are yearning to leave behind.

Whether or not they eventually *do* leave it behind, they are certainly talking a good game. To live in China today is to be bombarded with the language of economic reform. The newspaper and radio reports (those in English, at least) brim over with it; phrases like "joint venture," "free market," and "individual work-unit decision-making" are everywhere. There is an exuberance in this new language, and in the people who speak it—a crazy energy, a sense of drive. Call it Reformspeak. It's the language that celebrates the new political correctness of getting rich.

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For several years, of course, farmers from the outskirts of Beijing have been doing just that—getting rich—by selling excess produce on the city streets. They set up shop in the ramshackle green booths that line several of the capital's pedestrian-choked avenues, hawking cabbages, beans, and unidentifiable pieces of yellowish fruit. Unlike government-owned markets, where herculean physical efforts are sometimes required to penetrate the wall of indifference surrounding members of the service staff, free markets are enclaves of the old-fashioned hard sell; booth operators cajole, entice, and wheedle potential customers, apparently having made the unfortunate but accurate assessment that people can be coaxed into parting with their money.

Seeing the popularity and success of these free markets, the government is now trying to carry their spirit of free enterprise into other segments of the economy. New legislation has been proposed to allow "intellectuals" (that all-inclusive category of engineers, teachers, editors, etc.) to earn extra income in sideline jobs like freelance copyediting. Meanwhile, private businesses and enterprises, which now employ about two percent of China's one billion people, are encouraged with growing enthusiasm by the government. Cities are praised in the press for solving their economic problems by leasing unproductive government-owned factories to individuals. "We must have a new view of bourgeois culture," summed up one Chinese commentator quoted in the *New York Times*. In other words, we must borrow from bourgeois culture whatever seems to work, whatever lets the black ink flow.

Meanwhile, the big statues of Mao keep disappearing from their pedestals on college campuses, one by one. . . .

Many Chinese, heady at the prospect of this new wealth (if not yet with new wealth itself), are indulging themselves in an orgy of consumerism. Young men in leather jackets haunt the tourist sites, offering to change money illegally so that they can get the dollars and foreign exchange certificates needed to buy imported electronics. Children, who are often the beneficiaries of their parents' materialistic fervor, are clothed in elaborate outfits of countless colors, most of which do not occur in nature. There are even commercials on TV now, for everything from insecticides to industrial machinery.

Nothing, however, embodies the new spirit of consumer abandon better than the elaborate banquets thrown in China nowadays. These mainstays of Chinese business and social life have been getting ever larger, ever longer. Last year, in an attempt to curb the extravagance, the Beijing government laid down the law: no banquets longer than 90 minutes, and no more than four dishes plus soup for each guest. Nobody listened, and the celebrations continued to expand. Xinhua, the Chinese news agency, recently estimated that over fifty percent of the weddings in Shanghai cost more than 7500 yuan—about $2000—which is seven times the annual income of the average worker.

With stories like these to tell, it's no wonder the media sometimes neglect the fact that, while China is certainly changing at an unprec-

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edented clip, it's still a long way from attaining anything like the modern infrastructure of a Hong Kong or a Taiwan. Backwardness (the Reformspeak term for what the current economic measures are trying to correct) is still widespread. You can't, for instance, buy a round-trip train ticket to anywhere in China today; even buying a one-way ticket can involve hours of frustrated haggling. Drive ten minutes out of Shanghai and you come across farmers still plowing their fields with oxen. And even in our own suburb of Haidian, less than seven miles from the Gate of Heavenly Peace, the streets are still crowded with dilapidated carts pulled by traffic-numb old mules.

Getting rich, you see, is a relative matter. According to Radio Beijing, the poverty line in China is around $50 U.S. per year—a figure whose horror only becomes fully apparent when you realize that if one makes $51 a year in China one isn't considered poor. An average worker earns less than $300 annually. Granted, prices are extremely low by American standards; most of the Chinese we know, for instance, are paying less than two dollars a month for rent. But the country's 11% overall inflation rate (which is more like 20% in urban areas) is causing a lot of frustration. And when Vice Premier Yao Yilin recently announced China's impressive 9.4% GNP growth rate for 1987, many people here were tempted to wonder cynically, "Yes, but 9.4% of what?"

All of the grim economic figures, however, can't change the fact that the Chinese themselves seem generally optimistic. Most of my wife's relatives (we've met 59 of them) claim to be happy with the way reform is going. "Middle-level intellectuals" they call themselves. Many of them are moving into new high-rise apartments, trading up to three or four rooms from the formerly standard two. Individual rooms must still perform multiple functions—the notion of separate dining and living rooms is bizarre to a lot of urban Chinese—but accessories like foldaway beds and collapsible tables are making living spaces more flexible. Televisions, of course, now appear in many apartments, usually enshrined in a place of honor and draped with an ornate dustcloth. And some families are even getting telephones (another of those double-edged statistics: the number of privately-installed telephones in Beijing more than doubled in 1987—to 13,886, in a city with a population approaching 10 million). The living seems pretty good, in short, and whenever we can get our relatives to stop feeding us long enough to talk, they're eager to discuss Deng and the reforms that are altering their lives in countless small and large ways. Generally, they speak very positively of the changes, but there is caution in their voices, their enthusiasm tempered perhaps by the vicissitudes of four decades of policy changes and sudden ideological turnabouts.

For there's another thing that casual observers of China sometimes forget. In all the brouhaha about economic reform, the fact can be lost that New China has yet to institute anything equivalent to Mr.

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Gorbachev's *glasnost* next door. Life in Beijing still retains a subtle aura of Orwell. At first, when several of our fellow students at the institute complained of being watched by "the authorities," we thought they were simply being paranoid. Now, after encountering a few officials who seemed to know a lot more about us than they ought to, we're not so sure. In fact, some long-term residents and journalists have told us that, budgets permitting, we probably *are* being watched, at least in a cursory way. After all, it's not very difficult in a population as homogenous as Beijing's to keep an eye on a 6-foot-2, bearded WASP and a Chinese-American with a mildly punk haircut.

Yes, there are the much trumpeted signs of liberalization, the stories that *China Daily* loves to tell its English-speaking readers—the nude-painting exhibition that's opening in Beijing, the monstrous popularity of disco and break dancing, the new weekly broadcast of American pop music (you may have read that the government cut "Roll Over Beethoven" from the first program, considering the song disrespectful of the composer). But many of these changes are cosmetic. The astrophysicist Fang Lizhi, China's leading dissident, denies any real progress at all. "On the surface, there is more tolerance," he says, "but this is not so in reality." Fang believes that, while many of the Party's old hard-liners stepped down from the Central Committee last fall, they still wield their repressive power behind the scenes.

And, certainly, the evidence of a Chinese *glasnost* is scant. Much campus grumbling was caused recently by a change in the government's policy concerning the number of students allowed to study in the U.S. each year. The total is to be drastically cut, to only 600 students per year, because of an alleged brain drain—too many students, absorbing decadent American ideas, were deciding to stay on in the U.S. after their five-year visas ran out. Though the government has since denied that the policy has changed, no one seriously doubts that it has. Students claim that the real reason for the brain drain—the fact that most returning students are assigned jobs ill-suited to the talents they acquire abroad—is not being addressed by the government. Their argument, however, does not seem to have reached official ears.

In fact, living as students in China, we are constantly reminded of just how closed a society it remains. After all, this is a place where until recently news of train accidents was suppressed as being unhealthy for the masses to know. I sat in the library of our institute one gray afternoon comparing *China Daily*'s reports of the unrest in Tibet (taboo subject number one) with those in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. According to the latter, around eight persons, most of them Tibetans, were killed; *China Daily*, meanwhile, reported only one death—of a Chinese policeman.

This closedness is something you have to get used to, since there is absolutely no conception here of that free flow of information on which the functioning of modern societies increasingly depends.

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Information is kept close, hoarded, hidden away, almost like a substitute for wealth. That's true in many places, of course, but the reticence here applies to even the most innocuous kinds of information—what day the hot water is turned off in the dorms, where one can buy language tapes for class, how we will travel to Datong this weekend on an institute trip. All of this is kept secret, for no fathomable purpose. Direct questions are evaded; no one gives any reasons.

Naturally, this kind of informational isolation can seem unduly ominous when you're living in a tiny, dusty dormitory room with straw mattresses, burlap curtains, and lamps with 40-watt bulbs. Our only connection with the outside world is an erratic mail service and a beat-up Walkman that seems to receive only Beijing opera for most of the day. In such an atmosphere, rumors abound. One of the first things we learned in China is that newcomers must plug into whatever information network they can find, no matter how unreliable. In our dormitory the most active rumor mill is that of the Japanese students, who vastly outnumber the rest of us. We speak to them every night as we stand in line waiting for hot showers in the basement. The news we hear, however, reeks of xenophobia and distrust: the Shanghai hepatitis epidemic has spread to our campus; there is plague in Hohhot, cholera in Suzhou; two people in our dorm have contracted scarlet fever; a Japanese woman, after being raped by a group of African students, contracted AIDS and was taken away to Shanghai.

One never knows quite how seriously to take these rumors. For instance, one Japanese student did indeed come down with scarlet fever. She had brought it with her from Japan—something the rumormongers had significantly neglected to tell us. But this is how information circulates (or fails to circulate) in China. We exist in a state of perpetual semi-ignorance. And we eventually accept that condition, becoming dull to the strangeness of living without hard facts. Even certain ironies of Chinese life don't seem ironic anymore. When I learned recently that there's a best-selling brand of cigarettes here called "Longevity," it didn't seem strange to me at all.

But meanwhile, life goes on in Beijing, whether we foreigners grasp its subleties or not. Rumor has it that they're playing the Toreador Song from *Carmen* over loudspeakers at the Badaling section of the Great Wall. Sitting around our shadowy dormitory room, we and our fellow students speculate on what it can mean: Another sign of approval for the advancing Westernization? Or just an old cassette that somebody's overseas cousin brought as a gift? In China today either explanation could turn out to be true. We'll let you know if we ever find out which one really is.

GARY KRIST

This letter was written before the policy reversals announced by the Chinese government in October.

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London Theater-Going

WE PLUNGED INTO THE LONDON THEATER last summer little knowing what to expect. Our odyssey began in London the 19th of July when we attended a superb performance of *Driving Miss Daisy* and ended in Dublin on the 12th of August as we witnessed an equally dazzling performance of *The Playboy of the Western World.* Between those dates we saw more Renaissance drama than anything else, going mainly to the National Theatre on the Thames—and specializing, as it were, in revenge tragedy. This makes our theater-going, which started off calmly but quickly became compulsive, even addictive, appear to be a good deal more planned and orderly than it was. Had we not left London to drive around the country—and then left England itself for Ireland—we would have seen many more plays, especially Shakespeare. On some days we saw two plays in London, and even when we were taking outings to such towns as Winchester and Canterbury during the day, we were rushing back to the city for evening performances.

On the whole we were lucky in securing tickets. Our only real defeat involved Derek Jacobi's production of *Hamlet* in Richmond. We didn't try for returned tickets or standing room when we were warned that getting places in the theater would be a very long shot. We were disappointed by this turn of events, especially as we remembered Jacobi's masterly performance in *Breaking the Code* in New York earlier this year. A call to D. Jacobi produced the wife of David Jacobi and no tickets. Later our compulsiveness became even more apparent when we booked tickets for a matinee performance of *The Shaughraun* but did not appear for the play until that evening, when we were forced to buy a second pair of seats; but paying twice for such a brilliant production of Boucicault's lively and engaging melodrama was worth it.

Our persistence about *Hamlet* was rewarded when, quite unexpectedly, we learned at 7:30 one evening of an 8 o'clock performance of the play to be held at the Rose Tavern in Chelsea. We rushed to the little theater over the pub. The play was staged within an area no larger than thirty by fifty feet, including seating; but this change of scenery and scale was surprising and refreshing after the elaborate productions at the National Theatre—particularly the excessively lavish productions of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (Alan Ayckbourn) and *The Tempest* (Peter Hall). This barebones production, with Hamlet dressed all in black except for a scruffy pair of brown shoes, contrasted sharply with the expensive staging and costuming mounted by Ayckbourn and Hall, not to mention the sometimes whimsical, sometimes leaden production of *Hamlet* in Swedish that was performed in New York this summer by the Royal Dramatic Theatre of Sweden and directed by Ingmar Bergman.

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Some of the cuts may have been questionable, but on the whole this version of *Hamlet,* taken from the Arden edition and necessitated by the smallness of the company and of the theater, was convincing, with a quick pace and a compelling dramatic logic. Laura Thompson, who as a stand-in played Gertrude adequately, was a good director; Gregory Cox, who in an imaginative stroke of casting doubled fraternally as the ghost and Claudius, did a more than creditable job with both figures; Michael Rennish was a very believable Polonius; John Vernon fulfilled his part as Laertes very effectively. Vincent Regan played Hamlet more persuasively than Prospero was played in either the National Theatre or the Royal Shakespeare production by actors much his senior. All in all this production of *Hamlet,* mounted by a small group of professional actors, most of them young, was extraordinarily successful; and we salute the whole company. Nowhere but in London could this kind of production have been staged so well.

During a season in which Restoration comedy and contemporary drama vied with Shakespeare on the stages of London and Oxford, one was struck by a strong revival of Thomas Middleton, to us the greatest playwright of the Renaissance after Shakespeare. Aside from the impressive production and performance of *The Changeling,* there were two productions of *The Revenger's Tragedy,* one billed as being written by Middleton and the other ascribed, as usual, to Cyril Tourneur. It is too bad that T. S. Eliot, with his keen eye and ear, did not realize the strong possibility that *The Revenger's Tragedy* is Middleton's.

Middleton exasperated Eliot, who worried that he had no identifiable personality and found him long-winded and tiresome. All the same Eliot perceived that *The Changeling* is an "eternal tragedy" underneath whose conventions runs a "stratum of truth permanent in human nature." He compared the play favorably to *Macbeth*: "What constitutes the essence of tragedy . . . is the habituation of Beatrice to her sin; it becomes no longer merely sin but custom. Such is the essence of the tragedy of *Macbeth.*"

The Changeling was beautifully staged, produced, and acted at the National Theatre; and it received, as it should have, enthusiastic responses from a wide range of people, many of whom could have known Middleton's drama only slightly, if at all. Miranda Richardson played Beatrice-Joanna with great aplomb and credibility; George Harris was even better as De Flores; and Caroline Lee Johnson was exceptionally effective in portraying Diaphanta. The cast as a whole was first rate, particularly in the mad scenes. The actors, as was the case with *The Shaughraun,* the Royal Shakespeare *Tempest,* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* worked extraordinarily well as a company, with great panache and enthusiasm and equally great commonality of spirit and purpose. Richard Eyre, the director, deserves much credit.

Such was apparently the case too with Alan Ayckbourn's produc-

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tion of *'Tis Pity She's a Whore,* but Giovanni, the leading male role, was played mechanically by Rupert Graves, who looked more nearly like a foppish teenager than a great lover and commanding presence—and who seemed miscast. Despite very competent performances by Suzan Sylvester as Giovanni's sister, Annabella; by Richard Cordery as Bonaventura (the friar); and by various other actors, the play never fully came to life. The theme of incest—Ford's chief, perhaps his sole, theme—was not sublimated in the performance and was never anything more than tawdry. Although Ford is a decadent playwright, a minor late Jacobean, the fault appeared to be the director's, not the author's, so far as this production went. Ford's major plays, as Kenneth Muir has observed, *can* be effectively staged.

We saw but one other play that disappointed us so greatly—Simon Gray's *The Common Pursuit.* Its academic dryness and over-all dullness clearly resulted from the playwright's failures, not those of the producer or actors. Were F. R. Leavis alive to see this academic exercise, with its jejune allusions to him, one may be sure that Gray would receive a withering blast of Leavis' vitriolic contempt. The same could be said of Ayckbourn's *'Tis Pity,* which requires no Eliot or Leavis to see through its pretenses.

One doesn't have to read Aristotle to realize that spectacle—grandiose costuming, staging, music, and other visual and auditory effects—will not carry a play. That was obvious in *'Tis Pity*; it was even plainer in Peter Hall's production of *The Tempest,* which featured far too many scenes depending largely upon various figures, Ariel particularly, descending from the heavens by means of motor-driven cables. Ariel threatened to make Superman look like a tyro at flying. The sight of the cleft in Ariel's trim derrière and the vast expanse of Caliban's naked backside seemed bizarre distractions amid such visual splendor. Jennifer Hall was uninspired as Miranda, and Michael Bryant no more than adequate as Prospero.

In contrast the Royal Shakespeare Company's production and performance of the same play, directed by Nicholas Hytner, were far more effective, even though John Wood's Prospero was slightly disappointing. This Prospero, like that of Hall and Bryan, was too cranky and down-to-earth—and, while affable, lacked Prospero's kingly generosity and dignity. In both productions Caliban was more comic than threatening, and in each case he seemed subhuman—and altogether ineffectual in his plotting. You could not sympathize with him as a distorted version of humanity or as a noble savage gone to the dogs. The elegant staging of the Royal Shakespeare Company at Stratford fortified a strong performance by the company rather than distracting from the play as happened with the Hall production at the National Theatre. The most effective sequence in both productions was the first, the storm scene, in each case powerfully staged and performed.

After we saw *The Tempest* in London but before we went to

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Stratford, we enjoyed a lively performance and production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Open Air Theatre in Regents Park. Neither sporadic rain nor the occasional cacophony of sirens, aircraft, and jackhammers could spoil a lovely occasion, which was enjoyed by large troops of schoolchildren as well as childlike adults, ourselves included. The acting and staging were rivalled only by the companies playing *The Changeling* and (at Stratford) *The Tempest.*

These Renaissance plays, with all their complex webs of motive and action, more than hold their own against modern drama; but we admit to being moved by *Driving Miss Daisy* and powerfully affected by *Lettice and Lovage.*

We came away from London and its theater with an enhanced view of what Samuel Johnson meant in saying that a man who is tired of London is tired of life. We tired neither of the city nor its theater and wished only for more of its life and art. ("Dear, old-fashioned, leisurely, traditional, eccentric London," says V. S. Pritchett, "is a legend we have successfully sold to foreigners—even to ourselves.") With greater resources and fewer responsibilities we would have stayed on to see the productions of *The Jew of Malta, The Revenger's Tragedy, Macbeth,* and even *Titus Andronicus.* Perhaps we would have emerged from the experience so drenched in blood that we might have had to imbibe a cordial of comedy—say *Twelfth Night* or *Cymbeline.* Or, unreconstructed and unregenerate, we might have tried to drum up a performance of *The Spanish Tragedy* as a finale.

SUSAN CORE AND GEORGE CORE

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BRUCE BAWER

Helen Vendler, Poetry Critic

Helen Vendler is the colossus of contemporary American poetry criticism. In an age when the audience for poetry has dwindled down to a precious few, and when only a handful of general magazines even bother to publish poetry criticism at all, Vendler looms hugely over the ever-shrinking landscape. No one in America today has more power to create or to damage a poetic reputation. Even T.S. Eliot, in his time, did not exercise so considerable an influence upon American poetry as Vendler does at present. Simply to list her credits is to describe a degree of visibility, in relation to her peers, that no other critic of poetry has ever enjoyed in America. She is, first of all, the poetry critic—not simply *a* poetry critic, but *the* poetry critic—for the two most prominent journals in this country that feature poetry criticism, the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*. (She has also reviewed poetry frequently for the *New York Times Book Review*.) She is the William R. Kenan Professor of English and American Literature and Language at Harvard University, and is the centerpiece of the American poetry criticism list of that university's highly prestigious press. Not only does Harvard publish her books of criticism, furthermore—among them *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens's Longer Poems* (1969) and *Part of Nature, Part of Us* (1980)—but when it came time to compile the *Harvard Book of Contemporary Poetry* (1985), it was Vendler who was signed up as editor. Likewise, when the producers of the Public Broadcasting System's recent "Voices and Visions" series about American poetry wanted a series consultant, it was Vendler whom they hired.

In short, Helen Vendler has assumed a singular, and a truly remarkable, place in the criticism of our time: she is that individual to whom a disproportionate number of the most influential editors, publishers, and producers automatically turn when the subject is poetry. In some of the most august editorial chambers in the country, to think of poetry criticism is

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to think of Helen Vendler. How, one may wonder, has this peculiar state of affairs come to pass? The answer is, I think, an involved, interesting, and instructive one. To begin with, it seems to me that Vendler's prominence is directly related to the unprominent position of the art in which she specializes. Let me explain. A generation ago, it was a frequent complaint among poets that the typical educated American was ignorant of and uncomfortable with poetry; nowadays, alas, even the typical professional literary person—whether writer, editor, or publisher—is rather ignorant of and uncomfortable with it. And even those relative few who retain a lively interest in and affection for the poetry they learned in school don't know much about the poetry that is being written today. Yet, every so often, such people must make decisions relating to contemporary poetry—decisions about review assignments, editing assignments, consulting assignments. In such an atmosphere, name recognition is all-important. An editor who knows little about contemporary poetry is unlikely to know much about those who do know something about it. He will tend, therefore, to go with a known quantity. What this means is that he will be likely to go for established poets and for big-name English professors at major universities.

But how many poets or academics of this description are actually capable of writing for a general audience about poetry these days? Not many. In growing numbers, the academics are irredeemable ideologues, straitjacketed by perverse conceptions of the nature of literary art (not to mention incapable, by and large, of producing readable prose). How about the poets? After all, since the Renaissance it has been poets who have made the most estimable contributions to poetry criticism. One thinks, for instance, of Sidney's "Apologie for Poetry," Dryden's "Essay of Dramatic Poesie," Wordsworth's "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, Arnold's *The Function of Criticism*, and Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent." As recently as a generation or two ago, the major American poetry critics—such people as Randall Jarrell, Delmore Schwartz, and Louise Bogan—were also distinguished poets. But things have changed dramatically. In our time, most American poets seem largely incapable of thinking critically or of writing competent, intelligent prose about their art; when

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they do want to say something, whether about their poetry or someone else's, or indeed about the art of poetry in general, they tend to do so in interviews or published "conversations." And what they have to say often proves to be astonishingly banal.

That leaves a relatively small number of suitable candidates for the role of American poetry critic to the multitudes—among them Helen Vendler. One factor in her favor is that she is not an ideological critic but, by her own description, an "aesthetic critic." Quite admirably, she believes that a poem should be judged according to its value as a work of art and not according to its fealty to one or another set of extraliterary principles; she has little affection for poststructuralism, and even less for Marxist and feminist criticism. What's more, she writes (for an academic) a relatively lucid prose, relatively free of jargon. All this makes her more welcome in the pages of a general-audience magazine like the *New Yorker* than many a member of the Derrida-era professoriat would be. Beyond these factors, however, the fact that Vendler, rather than some other, similarly qualified individual, came to be the most known of known quantities in her field is doubtless largely a matter of chance. What is certainly undeniable is that for some time now, the main factor in Vendler's rising visibility has been the snowball effect: every time an editor, producer, or publisher taps her for another high-visibility assignment, the known quantity becomes even more of a known quantity. The problem of whom to retain for the occasional poetry assignment no longer exists. Thus does Vendler's fame feed both upon itself and upon the very obscurity of the art she criticizes.

As I have suggested, Vendler's role is doubly unprecedented. Not only is she the first American poetry critic to occupy so prominent a position in relation to her fellow American poetry critics; she is also the first non-poet to ascend to the first rank of those American critics who focus primarily on poetry. To my mind, the fact that Vendler does not write poetry (or, at least, does not publish it) is of considerable significance. For while such arts as music, painting, and architecture have often drawn their finest critics from the ranks of non-practitioners (e.g., Ruskin on art, Shaw on music), poetry is different. Poetry shares a medium—the written word—with criticism. Accord-

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ingly it is a good deal easier to imagine, say, a person attracted to the writing of art criticism but not to the practice of painting, than it is to imagine a person who is at once (a) drawn by his talents and his passions to the vocation of a writer and (b) genuinely and deeply responsive to the music of poetry but who (c) has no gift for, or attraction to, the composition of poetry. Indeed, it is here, I believe, that Vendler's principal deficiency as a poetry critic lies. For, deeply responsive though she may think herself to be to the music of poetry, the simple fact is that she lacks the one thing a critic of poetry cannot do without: a good ear. She has no taste. She is as likely to praise a bad poet as a good one, as likely to quote with admiration an awful stanza as an exquisite one. The poets whom she has attempted to add to the contemporary canon—notably Michael Blumenthal, Louise Glück, Jorie Graham, and Charles Wright—are conspicuously and uniformly bad. Vendler claims to be an admirer of Wallace Stevens, but the positively awful taste she has displayed in regard to poets who are her age or younger suggests that if Stevens were Vendler's exact contemporary, and had started publishing his poetry about the same time she started reviewing, she would never have paid any attention to him.

To be sure, Vendler has her virtues as a critic. Above all, she is good at taking poems apart and putting them back together again. Her explications of specific poems can be thoughtful and intelligent; she has a fine analytical mind, and can discuss with conviction and authority everything from a poem's sound patterns to its structure of meaning. I share her desire, moreover, that students be familiar with "a hoard of poems in the mother tongue, known so intimately that they become nature, not art," and her worry that "the classical and English canon may be slipping out of our grasp, to be replaced by a modern canon of unrhymed and translated pieces." (Yet who has done more than Vendler herself to canonize contemporary poets with no gift for form?) I think she's right to be uncomfortable when she sees a critic (Robert Hass) who can't read Polish writing about a poet (Czeslaw Milosz) whose work is written in Polish. (Yet Vendler herself, who is equally unfamiliar with Polish, has herself written an essay about Milosz.) She is correct, too, in criticizing Dave Smith for the inconsistent tone of his essays, which are by turns chatty, hortatory, and academic—

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and yet she seems incapable of recognizing that much of Smith's poetry, which she purports to admire, shares this same lack of tonal control. Which brings us back to her bad ear. Manifestly, Vendler's failure to perceive the deficiencies of Dave Smith's work is a vivid illustration of her inability to *hear* poems—and in an age when most other academic critics can't hear them either, and when otherwise thoughtful and sensitive editors feel too intimidated by and unfamiliar with the subject of contemporary poetry to question her critical judgments, Vendler (to speak bluntly) manages to get away with this cardinal failing. Her power is such, moreover, that whereas there is probably no one else whose name stirs up so much heated negative comment when poets and poetry readers come together, virtually nobody else has ever dared to air his misgivings about her in print. More than one poet-critic known to gripe loudly about Vendler at literary gatherings has been known, upon being assigned a book of hers for review, to turn around and praise her fulsomely.

That Vendler's ear for poetry has not improved in recent years is made painfully manifest in her newest book of critical essays, *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics.*[1] Reprinted not only from the *New Yorker*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *New York Times Book Review*, but also from the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *New Republic*, *Salmagundi*, *Poetry*, *Critical Inquiry*, the *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, and two academic anthologies entitled *What Is a Poet* and *Textual Analysis: Some Readers Reading*, the thirty-six essays collected in this volume are concerned with the work of some thirty or so poets (from Wordsworth and Keats to Ashbery and Ginsberg), with a handful of critics (e.g., Bloom, Barthes, Robert Hass), and with—to quote the title of the opening essay—"The Function of Criticism." It is while reading this very first essay that one begins to entertain grave doubts about the nature of Vendler's responsiveness to poetry. For throughout much of this essay, Vendler's emphasis is not upon the question of the value and purpose of literary criticism (which is, of course, an ancient and valid area of inquiry) but upon the

[1] THE MUSIC OF WHAT HAPPENS: Poems, Poets, Critics, by *Helen Vendler*. Harvard University Press. $29.50.

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question of the critic's reason for writing criticism—the "motives for criticism," as she puts it. The best Vendler can offer, by way of an answer to this question, is a frightening list of possible motives which she herself describes as "discreditable (if entirely human) ones . . . envy, competition, defensive reaction-formation, power-seeking, and spiritual parricide."

Not a word does Vendler breathe about what, to my way of thinking, should be the foremost motive of any true poetry critic: a love of poetry so strong that one feels compelled to voice one's reverence for the art's most gifted practitioners, compelled to separate the wheat from the chaff, compelled to express one's outrage whenever mediocrity is celebrated and beauty ignored, compelled to understand as well as possible what it is, in a given poem or body of work, that stirs one's soul. Vendler's failure even to give this motive a place on her list seems to me a mark of the thoroughly academic nature of her sensibility: to Vendler, plainly, criticism is not a calling but a profession. That this is indeed the case would seem to be supported by the revelation, in her 1980 collection *Part of Nature, Part of Us*, that her career as the nation's number-one poetry reviewer began as the result of "a lucky chance": "*The Massachusetts Review* annually commissioned someone to consider the year's work in poetry, and in 1966, when I was teaching at Smith, I was asked to take it on." Before that assignment, Vendler's writing had been of the most routine professorial sort: she had published a few academic essays and a scholarly book entitled *Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays* (which, by the way, she does not include in the dust jacket list of her "major books"). Her turn to poetry reviewing seems quite clearly to have been less a case of a woman following her heart than of a professor making a savvy career decision.

Vendler is, indeed, an academic through and through. One often gets the impression that poetry is unimaginable, for her, outside the English department. Certainly it doesn't occur to her that someone other than a university professor might read or write about poetry. ("[A] greater problem for those of us writing commentary on poetry," she maintains in one essay, "is the American compulsion to 'communicate,' intensified by our profession as teachers.") Her sensibility is essentially that of an academic clubbist. Though not a practitioner of literary theory,

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she nonetheless speaks of herself—and of everyone who writes criticism—as having "been put on notice, by the salutary sternness of literary theory, that our terms are likely to be interrogated." Likewise, though she disagrees strongly with the assumptions of feminist criticism, she quite blithely accepts the feminists' politicization of literature and their affirmative-action approach to the making of canons and reading lists as part of the academic status quo. ("As Sexton passes into the anthologies," she writes, "the more obviously 'feminist' poems will no doubt be chosen, and there is no reason not to represent them.")

Like a true academic, moreover, Vendler writes as if poetry without criticism is as valueless as an LP without a record player. The first chapter of *The Music of What Happens* concludes with the assertion that "[n]o art work describes itself," that "[o]nly by repeated casts of the critical imagination is the world around us, including the world of literature, finally described and thereby made known, familiar, and integral." (To be sure, the book's introduction ends with the seemingly more modest observation that "the art of poetry is far larger than any single description of its powers"—yet would it even occur to a truly modest critic to make such a self-evident pronouncement?) Likewise, citing some lines in which Ashbery "asks for a new criticism, deriving from the actual current practice of poetry," Vendler comments: "It is as though poetry were incompetent to see its own image until reflected in the discursive analysis of criticism. And it may be so." One gets the impression, in fact, that what Vendler admires so much about the work of Ashbery is that it cries out for a critic to explain it; implicit in her feverish analyses of Ashbery's poems is the notion that it is the very need for elaborate analysis that makes them deserving of attention. Vendler is strangely indifferent to the question of their actual merit, writing that "[n]o line, or . . . passage, or . . . inception or conclusion from Ashbery [can] be isolated as good or bad." When she wants to give an Ashbery poem, "Songs without Words," the ultimate accolade, she doesn't say that it's a great poem; rather—in a sentence that speaks volumes about the academic mentality—she writes, "Surely this poem will be anthologized."

Yet the fact is that Vendler has a much better understanding

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of how anthologies are put together than of how poems are put together. Whenever she tries to think like a poet, she comes off as surprisingly obtuse. Quoting four lines from a Seamus Heaney poem ("They were two-faced and accommodating. / And seed, breed and generation still / they are holding on, every bit / as pious and exacting and demeaned."), she comments that "[t]he five adjectives and the four nouns in this passage . . . cannot be budged (as anyone can discover by trying to put 'two-faced' in the place of 'demeaned,' or 'generation' in the place of 'seed')." Isn't this true, however, of any good poem—that to rearrange the words would be to weaken it? Indeed, the very concept is a cliché; but one has the feeling that for Vendler it's a fresh insight. She reveals this same obtuseness in an essay on Milosz, writing that the "linguistic versatility" demonstrated by Milosz and other poets—"combining words that have never been combined before, but doing it with a sublime justice and propriety, so that the effect is not a jolt but a confirmation of rightness—gives perhaps the highest pleasure that poetry exists to confer." Then there's a review of Amy Clampitt, wherein Vendler observes that "it is not just visual 'rendering' (by whatever analogies) that makes visual poetry 'work.' Poetic diction has its own laws that must be satisfied along with the requirements of the eye. Poetic diction demands that words be linked one to the other so that it will seem that they 'grew' there by natural affinity." Well, yes, and yes again. But don't we know these things already? Isn't Vendler restating, in these sentences, the very definition of poetry: a sublimely pleasing, truly original, but thoroughly right-sounding combination of words? For Vendler to make such observations as if they were provocative and récherché, and not central to the practice of any first-rate poetry critic, is surpassingly odd—but, alas, entirely characteristic of her.

Even when she turns from poetry to life, Vendler makes remarks that seem astonishingly fatuous. Reviewing Stephen Spender's journals, she suggests that his interest in politics may be "a result of his partly Jewish descent on his mother's side" (where does that leave Auden and C. Day Lewis?) and comments that "Spender always remains a neophyte in life, capable of being hurt, shocked, surprised; when David Hockney tells him in 1983 about someone who had died of AIDS, he writes,

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'All this seems inexplicable, baffling, terrifying'—adjectives we associate more with adolescence than with the eighth decade of life." Vendler's implication here is that fear, confusion, and terror are things we leave behind when we become adults; on the contrary, one suspects that it is the rare person in the eighth decade of life who is not at least as familiar with these emotions as the average teenager. In adolescence, after all, we think ourselves immortal, and it is only as we age that we begin to grow wary and fearful of death; if we appear more serene than adolescents, it is not because we have shaken off fear, confusion, and terror, but because we have learned how to behave in public. In any event, it seems to me that a writer (of whatever age) who is no longer capable of being hurt, shocked, and surprised isn't going to be writing much of value. Vendler exhibits this same distrust of emotion when she complains about Robert Hass's poetry criticism that he is "sometimes, to my tastes, sentimental . . . too fond of coercive words: *terrible*, *painful*, *wonderful*, *terrifying*, *agonizing*, *mysterious*, *shocking*, *raw*, *seductive*. Such words not only say 'Admire with me'; they are shopworn."

As a rule, Vendler's own professions of enthusiasm don't convince. When she speaks, for instance, of "[Ted] Hughes's remarkable adjectival gift," or of "Ginsberg's exuberant comedy," her praise seems *pro forma*; when she says that Merrill's rhymes "are the cleverest the language has seen since Byron," it sounds hyperbolic. Her characterization of various poems as "shocking" rings especially false, if only because shock, for whatever reason, is one of the few types of emotional response to literature with which academic criticism seems wholly comfortable. Vendler refers, for example, to the "shock" with which one reads Sylvia Plath's comparison of worms to "sticky pearls," and she says of a line in a pallid Ashbery poem that "[a] middle-aged American reads 'Hardly anything grows here' with immediate recognition, a shock not possible any longer from the mention in a contemporary poem of 'stubble plains' or 'the barrenness / Of the fertile thing that can attain no more.' " Vendler indulges, too, in what may be called the "no one else" formula:

> [A]t his best [Michael Blumenthal] sounds like no one else. I cannot

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> think of anyone in America just now who might write as Blumenthal does about looking down on one's house after death.
>
> There has not been for a long time a poem that sees us so helplessly in love with the rhythms of victimage and brutality, societal, sexual, and religious [as does Amy Clampitt's "Easter Morning"].
>
> [Ammons is] the first poet to have the conceptual equipment . . . to think this way. [That is, to reject anthropomorphism.]

Writing about Clampitt, Vendler says: "If Iowa has not had a poet before, it has one now"; in her essay on Ammons, she observes similarly that "[b]ecause of his coming, the literary map has changed, and as we have the New York of Whitman, and the Pennsylvania of Stevens, and the Massachusetts of Lowell, we now have the North Carolina of Ammons. There are states, many of them, still without a genius of the place. In celebrating the sixtieth birthday of A. R. Ammons, one celebrates as well the birth of North Carolina in his poems."

What Vendler values most in poetry is that which she describes, in "The Function of Criticism," as "the beautiful bizarre, not the beautiful familiar." To her, a given poet's most characteristic work—that is, his quirkiest, goofiest, most "original" work—is by definition his best. It follows from this that the quirkier a poet is, the better—and that when Vendler calls Merrill, for instance, "firmly idiosyncratic," she means it as the highest of praise. At the beginning of *On Extended Wings*, Vendler announces that her "touchstone has been the best Stevens could do—those poems in which he seems most himself, most original." Not surprisingly, this aesthetic criterion makes for some peculiar critical judgments: Vendler claims to prefer Stevens' "The Auroras of Autumn" to "Sunday Morning," and states that "the poem characteristic of Ginsberg, the one he writes over and over, is seen in its purest form in the faultless 'American Change.' " In "Looking for Poetry in America," she argues that "[e]very perception, without exception, does indeed, in poetry, need to be rendered strikingly." One would be more comfortable with this formulation if it had made use of a different adverb: *eloquently*, perhaps, or *beautifully*. Though it can serve as a synonym for either of these words, *strikingly* also connotes shock value, noticeably for its own sake.

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(And we've already seen, of course, how prominently the word *shock* figures in Vendler's criticism.)

In the first paragraph of a piece on Stevens, Vendler makes it clear that, to her mind, greatness and conservativism are antithetical: "Was Stevens good? great? original? or reactionary? conservative? derivative?" Later in the same essay, speaking of Milton Bates's book *Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self*, she expresses the hope

> that a new generation of readers, brought up on this book, will recognize that the naive canards about Stevens—that he was a heartless hedonist, an ivory-tower poet insensitive to social distress, a cold, over-cerebral aesthete, a poetic conservative, and so on—are all untrue. Bates's book rightly describes Stevens as a poet constantly enlarging the self . . . aware of social unrest, passionately concerned with the accurate way of conceiving the artist's role in the social order, evaluating the claims of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche long before most members of his generation. . . .

Patently, Vendler is eager here to rescue Stevens from the charge of being a conservative, formalist intellectual, and to help create an image of him not only as an aesthetic innovator but as a social and political rebel who was, by the standards of the American academy in the 1980s, politically correct. Vendler seems utterly unaware that it is Stevens' intellectuality, his austere aesthetic consciousness, and his powerful sense of form—not his politics, whatever they may have been—that make him a great poet.

A corollary of Vendler's love of the idiosyncratic is that she likes poets whose poems run away from them, and dislikes poets who know what they want to say and how they want to say it. Taking note of a description of clouds in a poem by Charles Wright, Vendler comments admiringly that whereas "in another poet visual accuracy would be uppermost, in Wright the *symbolic arbitrariness of the mind's play* [my emphasis] is at least as visible in such passages as any putative appearance of the clouds." She is equally impressed by Dave Smith, whose poems she finds "torrential, impatient, exasperated," and whose language is "theatrical, even melodramatic." She is less happy with Adrienne Rich and Philip Levine, whose poems aren't as "wayward" as Vendler would like: "They [Rich and Levine] are

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stern, even grim, ringmasters to their poems, and the hoops, once aligned at the beginning, remain in place in the poem for all subsequent jumps. One longs, reading Rich's *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* (1981), for the poem to take an unexpected byway, to reverse itself, to mock itself, to question its own premises, to allow itself, in short, some aesthetic independence." It is, needless to say, a most questionable notion that a poem should be "aesthetically independent" of its author; but this sort of idea is typical of Vendler.

Vendler doesn't like poems that *say* something—or, more accurately, she's very strict about the ways in which she thinks it is proper for a poem to say something. She draws a rigid distinction between art (as exemplified by painting and music) and discourse (philosophy, history, etc.), and finds it highly problematic that writing straddles both categories. Though at least once, in *The Music of What Happens*, she describes poetry as partaking of each of these tendencies ("The reflective and discursive verse of paradox represents one extreme of lyric; the opposite extreme is song. Song and reflection are the two sources of lyric, and poems move along a continuum between them"), she seems more often to see true poetry as "action," not "discourse"—as belonging, that is, only in the category of art. The more predominant the rhetorical or intellectual content of a poem, then, the less Vendler is likely to think of it as a true poem. She dismisses "This Dust Was Once the Man," for instance, as the work of Whitman "the orator-eulogist," not of Whitman the poet. What's more, in order to feel comfortable praising a poem widely thought to contain ideas, she finds it necessary to underplay, or even to deny, the presence of those ideas in the poem. Thus she ridicules Lionel Trilling's reading of Keats's "Immortality" ode as a statement of certain ideas about life. Time and again in Vendler's essays, language-as-action wins the day. Though she admires "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd," for instance, Vendler finds the poem flawed insofar as it does not approach the "vigor of language which we find in 'Song of Myself' or 'As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life' "; to the extent that the poem is "stately," imprisoned in "the fetters of a formal occasion and a formal genre," it deviates from Vendler's ideal of the "purely lyric" poem. It is in accordance with this conception of poetry that she distinguishes

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sharply between words and ideas, saying that "a writer who loves words—all words, single words—for their materiality and for their image-inspiring power is at the furthest remove from someone who loves 'ideas.' " A real poetic mind, in her view, "thinks in images." (Where does that leave Alexander Pope?)

One of Vendler's favorite words of approbation is *fluid*—a lexical choice that seems to follow from an envisioning of discourse as solid, art as liquid. Thus she speaks of Ashbery's "fluid syntax," says that "Louise Glück's sense of myth, while as firm as Ashbery's, is less fluid," and notes that A. R. Ammons "is sure that the number of fluid inner states is infinite . . . and the only mediating instrument between the liquid currents of mind and the mountains and deserts of matter is language." Often her distinctions between the fluid and the not-so-fluid are, to say the least, rather murky: "Ashbery's fluidity puts us in the *res cogitans* as it carries on its marvelous observations and retoolings; Glück's sternness reminds us that we have also a precipitate, a residue, from life's fluidity—that which we recite by heart, the immutable, the unadorned, the skeletal, the known."

As some of these quotations may suggest, Vendler would seem to spend much of her time trying to figure out what to say about a given poet or poem, in the manner of one to whom the act of criticism doesn't come at all naturally. The questions about the purpose of poetry criticism which she raises in "The Function of Criticism" never seem to be put to rest. She begins a piece on the criticism of Dave Smith, Robert Hass, and Robert von Hallberg by asking "What is there to say about a poem? about poetry? about a national poetry? about a poetry and the culture from which it issues?" On the first page of a piece about Harold Bloom, she says: "there has been a good deal of difficulty in knowing what it is proper to say about a lyric poem beyond what can be said about human imaginative expression in general." To be sure, the purpose of poetry criticism is certainly a valid subject for discussion, but Vendler returns to this question so often that you get the feeling she really *doesn't* know why she's reading verse and writing about it, aside from the face that the *New Yorker* pays well and that it's good for her career. At times one feels like yelling at her: "For heaven's sake, if you really don't know why you're writing about poetry, then why don't you just keep quiet?"

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And the fact is that time and again Vendler gives evidence that she really doesn't know what to say about a poem. Like many academics, she sometimes seems to think that it is the job of the critic to discover (or pretend to discover) in a work of literature a controlling theme or structural principle that no one has ever noticed before. Implicit in criticism of this kind is the conceit that everyone who has previously read the work under discussion has misunderstood it; the paradox of such criticism is that any work capable of being so ubiquitously misunderstood could hardly be regarded as effectively constructed in the first place, and thus could hardly be considered deserving of such close critical attention. Sensible but kind English teachers euphemistically call interpretations of this kind "ingenious": while they show a certain inventiveness, they have relatively little to do with the actual work of literature supposedly under consideration. Much of Vendler's criticism has been of this sort; her book on Keats, for instance, centers upon a dubious interpretation of the odes as a coherent sequence. Equally dubious readings occur in the present book. The essay "Reading Walt Whitman" offers an interpretation of "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" which is based on the notion that the poem represents a radical reworking of certain passages from earlier poems; Vendler argues that an awareness of these borrowings is essential to a full appreciation of the poem's pathos. While there are indeed similarities between parts of "Lilacs" and some of these earlier passages, Vendler describes the composition of "Lilacs" in a way that, it seems to me, would sould utterly foreign to anyone who had ever actually written a poem. And she engages in rather too much mind-reading: "Other fragments pressed forward in Whitman's mind as he composed. . . . It was in 'Lilacs' that Whitman sought to find a middle ground between triumph and 'the mournful voices of the dirges pour'd around the coffin'. . . . He wished to find, in the language of perception, an equivalent for transcendence." The lamentable consequence of such an approach is to make Whitman sound less like Whitman than like Helen Vendler. It is one thing for a critic to write about poems in the language of a critic; it is another for a critic to write about poets as if they thought like critics. Whatever genuine insights Vendler may have into a poem's form and

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meaning are rendered considerably less valuable by her thorough inability to understand the way a real poetic mind actually goes about creating form and meaning.

And yet Vendler has many of her readers convinced that she not only understands poetry, but also has a special insight into the nature of American poetry. Indeed, though she's written books about English classics—among them *The Odes of John Keats* (1983) and *The Poetry of George Herbert* (1975)—Vendler is best known as a critic of American poetry. She has some very firm, and questionable, ideas about the subject. Like many critics, she recognizes certain qualities as being more prevalent in American poems than in their English or Continental counterparts; but she goes further than this, arguing that the very presence of these qualities in American poems makes the poems more American than poems without these qualities, and consequently makes them *better*. If she admires Ashbery so much, it is largely because "Ashbery is an American poet, always putting into his poems our parades and contests and shaded streets. He sometimes sounds like Charles Ives in his irrepressible Americana." Indeed, "Ashbery's gift for American plainness is his strongest weapon." Yes, Ashbery's poetry is full of clichés—but this is perfectly fine with Vendler, who claims that "Ashbery's deep literary dependencies escape cliché by the pure Americanness of his diction." What Vendler is trying to say in this characteristically clumsy sentence, I think, is that the clichés in Ashbery's poetry are *American* clichés—that he writes the way we really talk here in America—and that his work therefore can't be faulted as poetry. On the contrary, Vendler would have us believe that those American clichés give Ashbery's work much of its strength. Ashbery, she writes, "insist[s], by his manner, that everything that is 'in English' has to be written over 'in American' "; to Vendler, this is precisely what an American poet should insist upon. She proffers an example of the contrast between British English and the "American language" of Ashbery's poetry:

> If Keats's sonnet reads,
>
> > When I have fears that I may cease to be
> > Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
> > Before high-piled books, in charact'ry,

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> Hold like rich garners the full-ripen'd grain;

then Ashbery will write,

> I think a lot about it,
> Think quite a lot about it—
> The omnipresent possibility of being interrupted
> While what I stand for is still only a bare canvas:
> A few traceries, that may be fibers, perhaps
> Not even these but shadows, hallucinations . . .

. . . The "educated" reader thinks that "poetry" must sound Keatsian, rhythmic, and noble. But our American language cannot speak in those "noble accents / And lucid inescapable rhythms" (Stevens) without modification. "I think a lot about it" *is* how we say "When I have fears."

To Vendler, in short, British English is "noble," American English colloquial. But surely every language has its high and low levels of diction. Vendler's implication here seems to be that in England, in Keats's time, common people actually talked in the elevated language of Keats's poetry, and that this alone made it proper for him to use such language in his work. Nonsense. In the same way, she appears to be saying that what validates Ashbery's poetry is that it represents the way we actually talk in America nowadays. But though the first two lines quoted from Ashbery seem colloquial enough, the rest of the quotation—beginning with "The omnipresent possibility of being interrupted"—doesn't sound any more colloquial than Keats. The main difference between the language of these lines and that of Keats's poetry is not that one is "noble" and the other colloquial, or that one is English and the other American, but that Keats's words are beautiful and expressive and Ashbery's are banal and unattractive. Vendler acknowledges Ashbery's prosiness; indeed, she praises the poem for its "flat American beginning." To her, clearly, a flat, prosaic American poem is a distinctly American poem—and the more distinctly American an American poem is, of course, the greater a poem it is. When Vendler wants to praise a poet who does not fit into this formula, such as James Merrill, she feels compelled to apologize for, or explain away, his artfulness: "Merrill's diction, though it can be fully literary [ugh!], is also colloquial and

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topical [huzza!], and in that way, though he generally writes in meter [alas!], he writes in the current language of America [yippee!]."

Vendler is uninhibited in her praise of Ashbery for his "comic" and "eclectic" use of the American language. Lines containing the expressions "show through" and "run out of" inspire her to rejoice in our native idioms: "when did 'to run out of something' become our normal way of saying that the supply was exhausted?" Look it up in your *OED*, Mrs. Vendler: the first citation of "run out of" dates back to 1713, to an English writer; in fact, it's not a uniquely American idiom at all. Nor is "show through," both of whose *OED* citations are of nineteenth-century English writers. In short, these aren't exclusively American idioms at all. But what does this matter, anyway? What does the provenance of these expressions have to do with the aesthetic value of poems in which they happen to appear? The fact is that while Ashbery does make frequent use of such idioms—which are really more distinctively colloquial than they are distinctively American—he rarely does anything interesting with them; if Vendler sincerely wants to see clever and funny uses of genuine colloquial American English, she'd be better off looking at the lyrics of Lorenz Hart, Ira Gershwin, and Johnny Mercer, say, than at the poetry of John Ashbery.

Throughout *The Music of What Happens*, "Americanness" serves as a well-nigh inflexible criterion of poetic excellence. If Vendler is less enthusiastic than one would like her to be about Elizabeth Bishop, it is largely because Bishop "resists the label 'American poet': there is in her work no self-conscious rebellion against English genres, or even English attitudes, of the sort we find in our poetry from Whitman and Dickinson on." It is largely on this account that Vendler compares Bishop unfavorably with Ashbery; on similar grounds, she compares Robert Frost unfavorably with A. R. Ammons. However much one may admire Ammons, one cannot but be embarrassed for Vendler when she remarks disparagingly that "when we read Ammons . . . we see how distant Frost is from his rural characters, even when they are adapted from his own experience."

Patently, Vendler has extraordinary ideas about the distinctions between American and non-American sensibilities. For

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instance, she writes in a review of Robert von Hallberg's *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980* that

> The reasons why the general public [in America] does not read poetry are probably neither political ("Read those outlaws? those fascists? never!") nor psychological ("I never could figure out that difficult stuff"). Rather, the reasons for the marginal status of lyric poetry tend, I would guess, to be largely historical and institutional. Poetry is not systematically and intensively taught in America as it is in Europe; since most world poetry does not reflect American history or culture, it has been thought irrelevant to our nation. Each European nation cherishes its poetry (and the classical poetry born on the same soil from which it grew) as part of the deposit of patriotism, and therefore institutionalizes it in the schools. There are no such reasons for America to institutionalize Virgil or Milton. A critic's demonstration that poetry is really about your life and mine and can be understood without difficulty cannot institutionalize poetry in America if a large social commitment to it as a patriotic value did not exist.

Well! All this American can say, in response to these observations, is that he, for one, read a good deal of poetry in the New York public schools he attended as a child. The main problem with poetry in America is not that people don't read it in school but that they don't read it once they get out of school. (But then Vendler wouldn't recognize such a problem, because poetry is, to her, an academic phenomenon; sometimes you get the feeling that if she weren't being paid to do so, she wouldn't be reading poetry either.) Likewise, in an essay on Roland Barthes, Vendler writes that "[t]he intellectual formation of a French child attracted to literature is hardly imaginable to Americans. We are unfamiliar with those sacred French institutions the *cahier* (the notebook in which never a blot can appear), the *dictée* (the oral dictation in which faults of spelling and punctuation are subsequently mercilessly reproved), the *manuel littéraire* (a potted version of literary history)—all the furniture of the school and the *lycée*." Sorry to break it to you, Mrs. Vendler, but many of us who attended school in America can identify well enough with such things—we had our notebooks checked for neatness, punctuation and spelling, and even had our equivalents of the *manuel littéraire*. The same ridiculous sort of contrast appears in a piece on Yale critic Geoffrey Hartman and his book *Criticism in the Wilderness*. Vendler readily accepts Hart-

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man's notion that American students are congenitally less competent readers of poetry because (in her words) "they haven't the cultural equipment to read it," not having "grown up in that architectural and civic context which surrounds Europeans and reminds them that art always issues from a historical, religious, and philosophical ground." This is absurd. Vendler speaks as if "cultural equipment" were something that Europeans are issued at birth, like football helmets and knee-pads; as if culture were something that one absorbed from buildings, like ground radiation, rather than from learning.

Similarly, in her article on Milosz, Vendler writes that "[t]here are no direct lessons that American poets can learn from Milosz. Those who have never seen modern war on their own soil cannot adopt his tone; the sights that scarred his eyes cannot be seen by the children of a young provincial empire. A thousand years of history do not exist in American bones, and a culture secular from birth cannot feel the dissolution of the European religious synthesis, on which Milosz dwelt in *The Witness of Poetry*, his Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard." Where does one begin to argue with this? First of all, the ghosts of John Winthrop, Roger Williams, Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, and their fellow New England colonists would be surprised to hear that America has been "secular from birth." Vendler writes about Americans, furthermore, as if we sprang up day before yesterday from the Virginia soil, with no churches, no forebears, no libraries, no awareness of world history, no consciousness of a heritage beyond these shores. Certainly a thoughtful and imaginative American is as capable of feeling "a thousand years of history" in his bones as well as any European; for the fact is that people exist not merely as pieces of a culture but as individuals. And it is as individuals, furthermore, that they read poetry and experience the emotions that it communicates. Too often Vendler, in her eagerness to promulgate sweeping definitions of America, its people, and its culture, ignores this simple fact.[2]

[2] Besides, it might be convincingly argued that since it is much more common in America than in Europe for an individual to claim descent from several different Old World national groups, the typical American individual has a more natural "feel" for European history, in Vendler's sense, than the typical European. But of course it is silly to make such comparisons in the first place.

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And too often she ignores such things as grace and clarity of style. For a writer whose job it is, in large part, to make delicately nuanced judgments about other writers' use of language, Vendler has perpetrated more than a few breathtakingly awful sentences. Some are disfigured by ugly jargon: "Keats declares that art requires a social cooperation between the encoder-artist and the solitary decoder-beholder. . . . In the sonnet 'When I have fears that I may cease to be,' Keats summons up a rich gestalt." (Would anyone who honestly responded to the music of Keats willingly sign her name to such sentences?) She can be sloppy about sentence logic ("Such passages alternate with a more relaxed mood") and diction (she refers to Seamus Heaney's colorful life as "an extreme sequence"); and sometimes she simply churns out the same sort of phony, fuzzy, fatuous prose that one may find under the bylines of a thousand overworked, underinspired professors on the publish-or-perish treadmill: "[Barthes] exemplifies his own definition of the human person—a consciousness constituted by the available languages of its social and historical era." Or: "Wordsworth is following, in his ode, the classic proportions of elegy." Or: "[Spender] takes upon himself the full consciousness of happenings in countries other than his own." Or: "Leithauser's search for perfection has, I think, been insufficiently noticed." Interestingly, the pieces in this book that were originally published in the *New Yorker* are considerably more well written than the others; indeed, one can tell from the first paragraph whether an essay is from that magazine or not. This may be a reflection of the famous extent and expertise of *New Yorker* editing, or it may simply indicate that Vendler puts more effort into her contributions to her flagship magazine than into her work for other publications.

Vendler herself has described her style as "Francophone and rhapsodic," and while I don't think that *rhapsodic* is quite the correct word, there are altogether too many sentences in *The Music of What Happens* in which Vendler's reach exceeds her grasp. She writes of Whitman's perceptions, for instance, that they "diffuse into the oceanic or the impalpable, as they draw further away from the senses and closer to the pure rhythmic utterance of words forming in air." (How's that again?) Similarly, she comments about a Seamus Heaney poem that "[t]he

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aesthetic claim made by a poem like this is that the passage of life can indeed be tallied in a narrative, and that the physical processes of life exquisitely resemble the mental ones, with a fluid sliding of import between them." She writes that Louise Glück's "struggle to find a fluent that is not false is the shadow-twin of her claim that there is a fixed that is not marred." (This sentence is a little clearer in context, but no more graceful.)

Pretentious diction abounds in Vendler's essays. Though she pretty much avoids poststructuralist argot (e.g., *metataxis*, *paralogical*, *intertextuality*), she delights in words like *appetitive*, *cotemporal*, and *methodized*, uses *instance* as a verb, speaks of "transcultural philosophic universals" and "linguistic economies," and refers (in various essays) to Whitman's "perceiving apparatus," A. R. Ammons's "conceptual equipment," and Charles Wright's "descriptive equipment." The word *enables* is a favorite (Vendler tells us that folk tales "enabled [Sexton] as a satirist" and that a certain realization "enables the song of the bird" in "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"). So is *enact*. She explains how poets resist the pressure to be political "by enacting an aesthetic which embraces social reality in an algebraic way"; how "[a]rt, in its social function, . . . enacts for us the paradox of our orderly symbolic capacity as it exists within the disorder it symbolizes"; how two poems by Heaney and Milosz "enact [the poem's] . . . necessary connection with social reality"; and how "stiff resolve and chagrined change of heart are enacted in separate [Davie] poems." In some essays she seems especially to favor pairs of esoteric nouns or adjectives, speaking, for example, of the "phrasal and atomistic" nature of perception, of Spender's "continuities and disruptions," of Hughes's "predatory and avian" poetry in *Crow*, of the way Heaney "aggrandized and consecrated his infant world," of the "trenchant and pugnacious self visible in Donald Davie's prose," of the "prophecy and peccancy" of Davie's verse, of the way a certain Davie poem "ends in temporariness and temporizing," of the "stinting and bare" quality of a second Davie poem, and of the "processional and epigrammatic" syntax of a third. (Vendler's characterization of her own style as "Francophone and rhapsodic," of course, also belongs in this category.)

There are many other things about Vendler's criticism that

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one could choose to elaborate upon. One might mention, for instance, the extremely narrow range of writers to whom Vendler is in the habit of making passing references; throughout *The Music of What Happens*, she continually cites either Keats, Stevens, or Ashbery (or all three) for purposes of comparison, even though in most cases none of these names seems remotely relevant to the discussion. But enough. It is not my intention here to enumerate every last flaw of Vendler's critical method. Nor do I mean to suggest that there are not even less competent people than Vendler writing about poetry these days; on the contrary, America certainly has its share of critics (not to mention celebrated contemporary poets) who, notwithstanding their intelligence, knowledge, and analytical skills, are crippled by perverse aesthetic criteria and by a tin ear. Far be it for me to suggest, then, that Vendler's deficiencies as a critic are in any way unparalleled. What is exceedingly disturbing, however, is that these deficiencies have never been written about prominently and at length, and that this altogether pragmatic public silence which her fellow critics have maintained in regard to her shortcomings has enabled her to accrue power and influence out of all proportion to her deserts. While Helen Vendler, in short, is not a thoroughly bad critic, it is without question a thoroughly bad thing that she wields such unparalleled influence upon the direction of American poetry in our time.

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LOUIS SIMPSON

The Magic Carpet

1

Every American is a movie critic.
We come by it naturally.
They don't have to teach it in school.

If she slaps him they'll soon kiss.

How to tell a villain . . .
He speaks English correctly,
has a butler and strokes a cat.

Let the people of other nations
make the cars and build cathedrals—
we know how to look at moving pictures.

So when a man named Wachsman phoned
and asked if I'd like to go to Paris
to see a movie and write subtitles
for twenty thousand dollars,
my expenses paid and back . . .

We had lunch the next day with his "associates,"
a Mister Peres and Miss Zigano.
"There's one thing," he said, "you should know.
If we decide to buy the rights
you can't back out later."

The associates looked me over.
I had a vision . . . of a body
surfacing in the East River.
"No," I said, "I won't change my mind."

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He leaned across and shook my hand.
"Good."

His sleeves had cufflinks.
Not human molars . . . ordinary gold.

2

I flew to Paris first class.
Lots of leg room
and liquor . . . plenty of that.

The hotel I was staying at
was right off the Champs Elysées
and furnished in grand style . . .
high ceilings, crystal chandeliers,
chairs and sofas in red velvet.

My room was on the same grand scale.
A card on the desk informed me
that a refrigerator had been stocked
for my convenience.

Another card . . .
that the Hotel Alexandre III
assured "en exclusivité"
to its clients female and male
the services of Madame Jacqueline Cornu
MASSEUSE-KINÉSITHÉRAPEUTE.

Where was it? I felt along the wall
and a panel opened. There was everything
for my convenience. I filled a glass
with whiskey.

Left a wake-up call,
crawled into bed, and turned out the light.

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3

I was on my second cup of coffee
when Wachsman appeared.

How was my flight?
Good. There were two items on my agenda.
I was having lunch with his assistant,
Monique.

And, at five, everybody
would be meeting in his suite.
Then he and Monique would take me to dinner.

Till five then. I took my leave
and walked to the Champs Elysées.
I bought *La Quinzaine* and had an espresso,
looking at the passers-by.
I could see myself years ago,
a student enrolled in the course
of Preparation and Perfectionment.

There were a bunch of Americans.
We didn't stay the course . . .
only Sy Coleman. He went into business,
importing, and sends his greetings
every Christmas . . . a picture of himself
smiling, with his wife and kids.
All my other Left Bank friends,
the painter, the composer, the novelist
have disappeared more or less.

I walked to the Rue de Rivoli
and browsed in the English bookstore.

4

Monique was the Parisienne
complete, down to the poodle

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that she parked at our feet.

I ordered snails. "That's unusual,"
she said, "for an American."
I told her I'd lived in France
for a year and never tried them
till the night before my ship sailed.
I liked them . . . but then it was too late.

Wachsman—whom she called Bernie—
had wanted us to meet.
What did I think about sex?
The movie I was going to see
was "erotic" . . . I shouldn't be shocked.

I said that it took more than a movie.
I'd had the usual experiences.
Besides, sex didn't seem as important
as it used to. In recent years
I'd found there was nothing better
than a woman you could talk to.

She smiled brightly. "Like the snails."

5

Bernie's partner had flown in
from London . . . one of a new generation
of youthful impresarios.
He managed the Odes of Keats, a rock group.

There were the two French producers,
Monique acting as interpreter.
Bernie introduced me as "the writer
I'm sure you know his work."

I talked to one of the Frenchmen.
The movie we were going to see
was based on a novel by Jules Romains.

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I was discussing Romains's theory
of Unanism when I became aware
that the room had fallen silent
and everyone was listening.
My opinions would be worth money
for the next twenty-four hours.

When I had finished talking . . .
"It's very fine, that," said Monique.

"Your friend," she said to Bernie,
"likes snails. I know a restaurant
where he can have them four different ways."

So we went there, and I ate the quaternion
and drank a carafe of wine.

Bernie and Monique were dancing.
He held her almost formally.
She danced with tosses of her head,
an air of gay abandon.

6

He stood on the embankment
looking down. A train had stopped
and he could see into the dining car . . .
waiters, people sitting at the tables
eating.

"Do you know what it was like
in the Depression? We were hungry.
And here were these rich people,
dressed in fine clothes,
eating all they liked, shoveling food
into their mouths."

There was a little girl
right below him. She took a taste
of something on her plate,

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made a face, and pushed it away.
Then she looked up, saw him,
and pointed.

He ran away.
But that dining car made an impression.

"I said to myself, one day
I'm going to eat all I want,
wear good clothes, and see the world.
That's what we're put here for,
to enjoy ourselves," said Bernie Wachsman.

7

The man who wrote the screen play
insisted on taking me to lunch
at Le Sahara. He was English
but liked his food highly spiced.

Over mounds of couscous
he told me that the "réalisation"
had presented certain difficulties.
For instance, there was a scene
in which a woman seduced the hero
under a table with her feet.

They found a freak in a circus sideshow
who could untie knots with her toes.

But "The Magic Carpet" wasn't pornography.
"You'll see . . . it's on the crest
of a new wave, the erotic."

When the check came he picked it up
with a horrible smile. Two of his teeth
were missing, the rest brown with nicotine.
"This is on me," he said, "you're my guest."

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8

Credits rolled. The opening scene . . .
in an office, with stenographers.
Lots of leg shots.

Who was it Mencken called
a garter-snapper? Hoffenheimer?
Hoffenheimer should have been here.

This was the seduction scene
the writer described, under the table.
The feet were short and fat.
They curved and wriggled . . .
like the feet of a circus freak.

There was one scene that pretended
to . . . what's it called? Redeeming value.

A poet reclining in a harem
recited some lines about flowers
and clouds, to a bevy of women,
the same who played the stenographers.
They had changed out of their skirts
and garter belts into Turkish costume,
some diaphanous material.

The lights went on. The projectionist
was changing reels. In a flash
Bernie's partner and I
were at his side.

I said,
"It has nothing to do with the novel,
it's just soft-core pornography,
the kind of picture they used to make
years ago in the States. It's terrible.
No one will want to set it."

Bernie turned to his partner.
He said, "I agree. It's no good at all."

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We saw it through to the end
where the hero faced a firing squad
and was saved by his fiancée.
Disguised as one of the houri-stenographers
she came flying on a magic carpet.

"It was very amusing, no?" said Monique,
smiling at me.
"Would you like to see it again?
We have the cinema for the afternoon."

No, I said, there was no need,
and she stopped smiling.

9

If the French were disappointed
they didn't show it.

We adjourned to a brasserie
where they spoke of other projects,
talking rapidly, citing figures
in the millions. Francs or dollars?
I didn't ask, for fear of showing
my ignorance.

They spoke of distant places . . .
Luanda, Brasilia,
that offered unheard-of opportunities.

Bernie took me to one side.
"These people may approach you
and ask you to work for them
on the movie. What will you say?"

I saw the body in the East River
bumping gently against a pier.
"I'd say no, of course."

Then we went back to the Alexandre

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to check out.

He looked at every item.
It's one thing to live on a grand scale,
another to be overcharged.

10

I moved to a hotel I know
on the Left Bank, that charges
twenty-five francs, including breakfast.

Here is my Paris, in these stones
and gutters . . . the smell of bread,
the butcher's, the perfumery,
the jeweler's.

The window of Nérée Boŭbée et Cie.
Naturalistes . . .
the skeleton of a toucan,
skeleton of a monkey,
rib cage of another monkey . . .
not to mention Minéralogie,
Paléontologie, and Pétrographie.

In the Louvre I look at still lifes
by Chardin . . . and the man himself
with his green eyeshade, looking up,
still absorbed . . . in three eggs,
a ceramic bowl,
some object like a ladle,
and a big copper pot.

I go to a play by Molière.

I gaze on the Pont des Arts
upstream at the island city
like a dragonfly on her bridges . . .
in the midst a single spire reaching
to the pearl-gray sky.

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11

I heard from Bernie again
years later . . . that is, from his lawyer.
He phoned to say that Bernie
was being sued for divorce.

If I were asked about his relations
with a woman in Paris . . . Monique Benayoun . . .
what would I say?

I said, that I had seen her
at a conference in his suite,
then the three of us went to dinner.
It all seemed perfectly innocent.

I heard the voice of the lawyer
relaying this information
to a voice in the background . . .

a voice that spoke of flying
to four-star hotels and restaurants . . .
of deals in movies, in diamonds,
in machine guns . . .
in anything but this silence,
this green wall of leaves,
and two azaleas.

What color are they?
I ask. "Fuchsia," she says.

She helps me with my writing.
Without her I'd probably be
at the bottom of the East River
with my feet in a concrete block.

A perfect natural specimen
for Nérée Boŭbée et Cie,
with the "hippocampe," a sea horse,
and "siponelle," large worm.

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ROBERT McDOWELL

A Trip to Mexico

The train pulled out of Nogales. Jack stepped back from the link-up as the train gathered speed and slid open the heavy door to the car. Walking down the aisle past chattering Mexican families discussing the goods they'd loaded up on in the border town, Jack spotted his big Jewish friend Martin and Irene. They were sitting knee to knee beside their luggage and had saved him a hard seat. Because Irene was Jack's girl he sat down beside her. She scooted over against the luggage and squeezed his knee.

"Isn't this great?" she said.

"So long to Los Estados Unidos," Martin said.

Jack said, "Got the cards?" Martin nodded, pulling a pack of Hoyle from his coat pocket. Removing the deck he shuffled and dealt out the cards for three-handed gin.

As he went through the motions, losing game after game, Jack thought what a strange thing it was to be on a train in Mexico. The day before the three housemates had burned through the afternoon drinking Bloody Marys on their deck in West L. A. It was Irene's idea to do this. Because she was ten years older than Jack and Martin, she always came up with the best ideas. Because she was restless and easily bored they did a lot of crazy things. Not that it was crazy to be going to Mexico. But it was dicey getting Irene's sister to call up their bosses on Monday with the message that they wouldn't be in to work for a week. "Jobs are a dime a dozen, but Mexico is forever," Irene had said. Jack tried not to think of the unemployment that might be facing him when he got back.

"Gin," Martin said, laying down his cards.

"Deal me out," Jack said. "You two play."

"You can't quit now," Irene said.

"I drove all night. I'm whipped." Jack put his head back and fell asleep.

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When he came to the train had shuddered to a stop.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Hermosillo," Irene said. She was looking out the window and Jack leaned over to look around her shoulder. The scene outside was dry and dusty, as if the village had just come out of a kiln.

"Sort of looks like parts of East L.A.," Martin said. A woman with one arm cradling a basket came up to the open window and spoke to them in Spanish. Irene spoke Spanish back.

"What does she want? Money?" Jack said.

"She wants to know if we want to buy shrimp tamales."

"I'll try that," Martin said. "I'm starved." He fished out some pesos and handed them through the window.

"Gracias," the woman said. As she smiled, handing up a bundle of oily paper, they saw that she was missing two front teeth. She took the pesos and moved on down the train. Martin opened the oily bundle on his lap and passed out the tamales.

"You sure these are shrimp?" Jack asked. "Not cat meat?"

"Gulf prawns," Irene said.

"They're good," Martin said. He licked his fingers and unwrapped a second tamale. Jack took a big bite out of his. He chewed a bit then pulled something hard out of his mouth.

"They're still in their shells," Jack said.

"When in Rome . . ." Irene said, polishing off her tamale.

By the time the train reached San Blas, Jack thought he was dying. The heat was serious, and the slow swaying of the train made him feel almost seasick. He thought Irene was kidding when she'd said that the trip would take about twenty hours. Twenty hours to go nine hundred miles? Ridiculous, he'd thought. Once in the States it had taken him twenty-seven hours to travel the same distance by Greyhound bus. Everyone knows that trains are faster than busses. When he pointed this out to Irene, she smiled and said, "This is a Mexican train."

Outside the train window the land looked hostile, unchanging. Jack wished for some greenery, a single tree, but the same barren landscape passed slowly by. In Culiachan the train was boarded by a band of Federales. They marched through the car in their sweat-stained khakis, ammunition belts crisscrossing their chests and rifles slung over their shoulders, and disap-

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peared into the next car. Jack craned his neck to watch them go then turned back.

"Should we feel safer with them on board?"

"Just don't hassle them," Irene said.

"Don't worry," Jack said. "Let's try those cards again."

The train arrived in Mazatlan in the middle of the night. They stood in the station and smoked cigarettes and argued. Because they were being spontaneous, because they had made no plans, they had no hotel to go to. All three were exhausted and sticky in their clothes. Martin and Jack needed to shave. Out on the street a small nervous man came up to them and asked in Spanish if they needed a taxi. Irene asked him to take them to an inexpensive but nice hotel in town and the two agreed on the fare.

The taxi was a battered black '62 Chevy. Jack sat up front with the driver and Martin and Irene piled into the back with the luggage because the driver couldn't get the trunk open. Either the car's shocks were gone or the roads were badly pitted, but the ride was bumpy. Twice Jack flew off the seat and rapped his head on the roof. After the second time Jack cursed. The driver said something in Spanish and Irene answered. In English she said, "We're almost there."

Ten minutes later they stopped in front of a low stucco building that took up half a city block. A series of numbered doors lined the wall facing them. They all got out of the cab and the driver rang the night buzzer. In a minute a sleepy guy with a sloppy moustache came out. The driver said something in Spanish, then Irene said something. Irene paid the driver and followed the other man into the office. When Irene came out she held up a key and walked down the wall of doors.

"Number six," she said.

Martin and Jack picked up the luggage and followed her. Inside Martin switched on a lamp between the two beds. The room was nothing special. The floor was bare concrete. There was nothing in the room besides two beds and a small table with the lamp on it. Beyond the second bed was a doorless doorway to a small room with a toilet and sink in it. When Jack went in to pee he saw that the toilet bowl was heavily stained. The water was brown. Pulling the chain to flush it he thought how he never imagined staying in such a joint. But he was still queasy

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from the train and cab rides and he needed sleep. Undressing, he climbed into bed beside Irene. Martin was already in the other bed. The sheets felt like sandpaper, and Jack asked Irene if she'd checked for bugs. "Go to sleep," she said, and turned out the light.

They lay there in the dark for about a minute when all of them heard it.

"What the hell is that," Jack said. It sounded like hundreds of thick toenails clacking madly on the floor. Jack leaned over Irene and switched on the light. The clacking stopped. All three sat up in their beds and stared at the floor. On the concrete were hundreds of motionless roaches the size of potato bugs or bigger. They had come out of the walls in the dark and advanced in a closing circle on the beds. "That does it," Jack said. "I ain't staying." Martin picked up a shoe and threw it at the bugs. They clattered back into the walls. Jack jumped out of bed and got dressed. "We can't stay," he said. "I'll be outside."

When Irene and Martin came out with the luggage Irene said, "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Go tell the guy. Get our money." Jack said.

While Jack and Martin waited, Irene woke up the guy and went inside.

"I called a cab," she said when she came out.

"Did you get our money?"

"He wouldn't do that." Jack wanted to go into the office and have it out with the guy, but Irene and Martin stopped him. He didn't know Spanish, they reminded him, what good would it do.

"In Mexico a deal's a deal," Irene said.

A half-hour later they checked into the Rio, one of the plush older hotels on the Strand. Their room on the second floor was three times the size of the room they'd left. It had a beautiful tile floor, a big bathroom with clean fixtures and a shower, large comfortable beds and a good sofa against a side wall. The far wall was sliding glass doors leading out to a deck overlooking the water.

"So this is Mexico," Jack said, walking out on the deck and leaning against the railing. "Let's turn in."

The sheets were soft and smelled clean. Jack turned off the

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light and waited. All he heard were the muffled sounds of the Strand traffic below and the breeze in the curtains. Then they slept soundly.

When Jack awoke Irene was coming through the door. She had on her two-piece bathing suit and was working her wet hair with a towel.

"I went for a swim in the pool," she said. "The water's marvelous." Jack put his hand on her breast and pulled her down. When they finished he was starving.

"Let's eat," he said.

"Down by the pool," Irene said. "Put on your suit." Irene went into the bathroom to comb out her hair and Jack got up. As he put on his bathing suit he looked over at Martin who was still sleeping. Irene came out of the bathroom. "Ready?" she said. Jack pointed at Martin.

"That guy can sleep through anything."

"We'll leave him a note," Irene said.

Down at the pool Jack and Irene ordered ham and eggs, corn tortillas and Bloody Marys. When the food came they dug in eagerly.

"Just like home," Jack said, starting in on his second Bloody Mary.

They had both gone for a swim and were clinking their Bloody Mary glasses together at the table when Martin appeared. He had on his trunks, sandals, and a floppy shirt. He was holding a newspaper and had a white hotel towel around his neck. He pulled a metal chair up to the table, draped the towel over the back of it and sat down. As if by magic a waiter in a red jacket put a Bloody Mary on the table in front of him. He opened the paper.

"Listen to this," he said. "An earthquake registering 5.4 on the Richter scale struck Los Angeles yesterday, causing extensive damage in the western basin."

"Chin chin," Irene said, raising her glass. "So we picked a good time to get out of town."

They sat by the pool for another hour drinking and discussing the earthquake as Martin ate.

"Maybe we should call your sister," Jack said.

"Que serà, serà," Irene said.

After they showered and dressed they went out in the late

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afternoon to walk around the town. But for the thin persistent shoeshine boys, many of whom seemed to be suffering from glaucoma, life around the Strand exuded glitz and money. The town's inner streets were different. Laundry draped on lines from window to window hung limp in the heat. Women with bundles tied to their backs or baskets balanced on their heads crowded the narrow sidewalks. Shouting children ran out of buildings to play in the street. Jack, Martin, and Irene wandered through teeming open-air markets where merchants hawked gourds, sandals, fresh fruits and vegetables, and velvet paintings of Jesus. As they turned a corner a sweaty man raced past them down the street, nearly knocking Martin to the ground. The man's sandals fwop-fwopped on the cobblestones as he ran, and what sounded like a cat in the large burlap sack he was holding at arm's length cried loudly.

After a light supper of frijoles, tortillas, and sliced tomatoes they walked back to the Strand and took a table at one of the outdoor cafés. The Gulf of California turned gold as the sun went down, and they worked on a bottle of Cuervo Gold as they talked, fending off the shoeshine boys and watching the traffic on the Strand.

"This is the tourist's life, all right," Jack said, watching two beautiful women in evening gowns get out of a car and go into one of the hotels. "But doesn't the poverty a couple of blocks away bother you?"

"Only when I think about it," Martin said.

Irene laughed and lit a cigarette. "You're drunk," she said to Jack. "You get morbid when you drink too much. Morbid and paranoid."

As Irene and Martin discussed the beauties of Mexico under a full moon, Jack watched a rat the size of a house cat amble up the middle of the street. As it got near their café the rat calmly veered to the roadside, walked under a parked car to the curb and disappeared through a sewer grate.

A breeze had come up off the water and Jack felt a chill. He stood up.

"I'm going in," he said. "I got some sun today."

"But we're going to the casino," Irene said, "at the new hotel up the Strand."

"Don't lose too much," Jack said. "See you in the morning."

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Jack went upstairs to their room and got into bed. Thanks to the tequila he dropped off quickly.

When Jack woke up there was a light on in the room and it was still dark outside. As he rubbed his eyes he saw that Martin was dressed and packing his bag.

"What time is it?" Jack said, yawning. "What are you doing?"

"Time to go," Martin said. "Come on."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"We had some trouble at the casino. Irene had one too many, I guess. She lost at roulette. She said the House was cheating. Then all hell broke loose."

Jack snapped back the sheets. He got up and started dressing.

"Where is she?"

"Downstairs paying the bill and getting a taxi."

"What's the big rush?"

"She owes a lot of money back there. We slipped out in all the confusion. But I don't think we should wait around for them to show up."

"How much did she lose?"

"About five thousand."

"Pesos or dollars?"

Martin looked up at him with a grim smile. "Dollars, man."

Jack started packing. "Her and her bloody scenes. They kill for that kind of money down here."

In ten minutes they were down in the lobby with Irene. The cab driver had already loaded Irene's bag, and he took Jack's and Martin's luggage to the car. This time all three piled into the back seat with Irene in the middle.

"Nice going," Jack said.

"Oh, bug off!" Irene said.

Jack could see she was high, very high. As the taxi bumped along to the train station her head jerked around like a bobblehead doll. Her eyelids drooped and her speech was slow and sloppy.

"What could I do?" she said. "They were cheating me. It was obvious. Tell him, Marty." Jack looked at Martin, who raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "Say, did you pack me a hotel towel? I forgot."

"What the hell do you want a towel for?" Jack said.

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"For a souvenir!" Jack shook his head and looked out the side window.

At the station they had a forty-minute wait for the 5:30 train north. After Irene bought the tickets, she lay on one of the wooden benches and dozed off. Martin sat on the bench beside her, watching the luggage, while Jack paced nervously, keeping an eye on the doors to the street. He imagined that any second the bouncers from the casino would barge in and slap them silly. Or else the Federales would pull up in a truck and cart them all off to jail. That would be pretty, he thought, rotting in a Mexican jail. He'd heard stories about young Americans just disappearing in Mexico. Even parents and congressmen couldn't get them back. And all because of Irene. He wondered what he was doing with her.

At six o'clock the train pulled in. Martin woke up Irene, and the three of them picked up their bags and ran onto the train. Finding two empty benches in the first car they dropped their luggage on the floor and waited. Through the window Jack kept his eye on the station entrance and nearly jumped out of his skin when a voice behind him addressed them in Spanish. But it was only the ticket-taker standing in the aisle. He clipped their tickets and handed them back.

In fifteen minutes the train was moving. When they were out of the station Jack relaxed a little, breathing deeply.

"Relax," Irene said. "You'll have a stroke."

"Do me a favor," Jack said. "Button it."

Irene made a face at him and lit a cigarette.

The train crawled back through Culiachan, San Blas, and all the parched countryside between. This time when the women with baskets full of oily paper bundles came up to their window at stops and spoke to them, they shook their heads and said, "No habla Español." When they got to Guaymas Irene stood up and grabbed her bag.

"Guaymas is gorgeous! I was down here once with my sister. There's a marvelous old hotel on the beach. You haven't been to Mexico until you've been to Guaymas."

"Maybe we should just get home," Jack said.

"Nonsense! We still have four days." Irene walked down the aisle and out of the car. Jack and Martin looked at each other.

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"She's holding most of the money," Martin said. "And she speaks Spanish." They picked up their bags and followed her.

Irene wasn't kidding. The hotel on the beach looked like a rich old Hollywood resort. The back of the lobby opened out on a courtyard, a large pool and sunbathing patio, and an imposing view of the Gulf. Walkways lined with palms and tropical flowers led off in several directions from the pool. Jack and Martin admired the view while Irene talked to the man at the desk.

When she joined them she said that they couldn't stay, the hotel was full up except for the most expensive rooms, but not to worry. A cheaper hotel was right next door, a motel, really, but they could walk over and use the pool. They picked up their bags and followed one of the paths to the cheap motel.

Jack was forming a picture of it in his mind while they walked, but when they got there it wasn't as bad as that. It looked like an early U.S. Motel Six, and it shared a long white sandy beach with the grand hotel next door. Irene went into the office, and when she came back she unlocked a door in the bungalow closest to the beach. The walls of the room were thin, but the room itself was clean. Jack tried the two beds and decided they'd do. Martin switched on the fan and unpacked his bag. Irene pulled out her bathing suit and went into the bathroom. When she came out she grabbed a towel and said, "Let's eat next door."

At the big hotel they grabbed a table by the pool and ordered salads and two Bloody Marys each. The salads were served in deep fried shells and consisted of shrimp and crabmeat, tomatoes and shredded lettuce sprinkled with lime juice.

"This is the best meal we've had in Mexico," Martin said.

As they finished the salads a good-looking older Mexican man came up to their table. He glanced down at Irene and did a double take. He had on blue trunks, a white shirt, and a natty straw hat. He removed his sunglasses.

"Irene!" he said. Irene looked up.

"Arturo!" She jumped up and the two hugged and kissed each other. "You know about Arturo," she said, turning back to Martin and Jack. "My sister and I spent one summer as his guests in Puerto Vallarta."

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Martin and Jack stood up and shook Arturo's hand as Irene introduced them.

"I've heard a lot about you," Jack said, sitting back down. Martin just smiled, admiring Arturo's strong Indian features, wavy white hair and white moustache.

For the next forty minutes Arturo sat at their table talking mostly to Irene, sometimes in Spanish. When at last Jack suggested to Irene that they go back to their motel and hit the beach, Arturo stood up and begged their pardon.

"No problem," Jack said. "Why don't you join us?" Irene chuckled sipping her drink. Arturo declined saying he had some business to attend to, but he'd see them later. "So that was the famous Arturo," Jack said as they walked along the path to their motel.

They had been back in their room for five minutes when the office boy arrived with a note for Irene. She read it to herself, and without showing it to Jack or Martin followed the boy back to the office.

"Five will get you ten it's from Arturo," Martin said. He was rubbing his legs down with suntan oil.

"That Caesar Romero? Yeah, probably," Jack said.

"He put me more in mind of Ricardo Montalban," Martin said. "You know, I can see him inviting her over to stroke his rich Corinthian leather."

Jack went to the window and looked out. "Well, here she comes," he said.

When Irene came in she went straight to the closet and pulled out the one evening dress she'd brought on the trip. She laid it out on the bed, then tossed some makeup things in her tote bag.

"Sorry," she said. "That was Arturo. He needs me to hostess an important meeting for him this afternoon. It might stretch into an early dinner, I don't know. I'll get back as soon as I can."

She slung the tote bag over her shoulder and picked up the dress. When she opened the door to leave Jack grabbed her arm and held it.

"What are you doing?"

"I told you!" Irene jerked her arm free. "Arturo's a dear old friend. He needs some help today." She adjusted the tote bag

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on her shoulder and walked out. Jack stood in the doorway watching her go.

"Sorry, man," Martin said. "Let's get some Cuervo Gold and try this beach."

All through the late afternoon Jack and Martin swam in the warm gulf waters and lay on the white sand talking and drinking tequila. By the time the sun was setting they were singing snatches of songs they'd heard in bars. Their memories were faulty, their singing poor, and when the tequila and the sun were gone they wandered back up the beach to their room.

Inside, Martin collapsed on his bed and began to snore. Jack peeled off his swimsuit and jumped in the shower. Through his alcohol haze he felt the water sting where he'd taken too much sun, but thanks to the tequila he quickly forgot about it. After the shower Jack got dressed and lay on his bed. He looked over at Martin who was still sleeping, and he thought about how they'd forgotten to eat anything. So what, he thought, maybe they'd grab a bite after a short snooze. Maybe when Irene got back. As he drifted off Jack thought about Irene making small talk with the rich of Mexico, and he thought about Arturo.

When Jack came to he sat on the edge of the bed and checked his watch: 12:20. He felt groggy. His head ached, and his stomach felt like it had a hole in it. He went over and shook his friend.

"Martin, you hungry, man?" Martin turned on his side and mumbled but did not wake up. "I am," Jack said, "and that bitch isn't back yet, either."

Jack began to pace, his head pounding, and he thought of Irene and Arturo together. He thought of Irene explaining the two boys she was traveling with. He could see Arturo talking Irene into coming away with him, and he imagined himself and Martin stranded in Guaymas. "Not this time," he said, and walked out of the room.

In the lobby of the large hotel next door Jack went up to the desk and rang the bell. When a clerk came out of a back room and Jack started to ask for Arturo's room number, he realized that he couldn't remember if he'd ever heard Arturo's last name. His head still throbbing, Jack described Arturo to the clerk.

"Ah, Señor Vargas," the clerk said. "Room 326. I'll call up for

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you." The clerk spoke Spanish into the phone, then hung up. "I'm sorry, but Señor Vargas is asleep."

Jack crossed the lobby to the lift and rode it up to the third floor. He walked down the hall to 326. A solid squat Mexican in white pants and a floppy blue shirt stood outside the door.

"Where is she?" Jack said to the Mexican. The Mexican said something in Spanish, and when Jack reached for the doorknob the Mexican blocked his path. "Irene!" Jack shouted. Then he stepped back and threw a right at the Mexican's chin. The Mexican blocked it with his left arm, and Jack never saw the punch that smashed into his left eye and sent him sprawling on the carpet. Before his head could clear the Mexican was picking him up, speaking Spanish again, and dragging him back to the lift. The Mexican propped Jack up inside and pushed the button for the lobby. Then he stepped out.

When Jack woke up in his bed at the small motel he felt like his head was under an anvil. The sun was already high up and bullying into the room. The room was hot. Jack slowly got out of bed and went into the bathroom. Leaning on the sink, he looked at his face in the mirror. His left eye was swollen, black and blue. Then he noticed that the rest of his face, chest, and arms were beet red. He looked down at his legs and the tops of his feet. They were sunburned, too. He felt chilly, and as he walked out of the bathroom to put on some clothes, Martin sat up in bed and groaned. His face looked puffy, and his skin was as red as Jack's.

"Oh, I feel like a lobster," Martin said. He gingerly swung his legs out of bed and sat there, gathering himself. Then he noticed Jack's eye. "What happened to you?"

Jack filled him in on his trip to the big hotel in the middle of the night and his run-in with the squat Mexican.

"Women," Martin said. "Woman trouble and tropical sunburn. This is one vacation I won't forget. Did you pick up more tequila?"

When Martin was dressed he poured himself a glass of tequila. Jack was already packing when Irene came in. She was still in her evening dress. She looked hung over and defiant and lay on the bed.

"Have a good time last night?" Jack said.

Irene ignored his tone. "It was a fun party. A lot of rich

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people. I would have called you to come over but of course we have no phone in this room and it got late and I crashed on the couch."

"Sure you did. Was there room on it for two?"

Irene got up and poured tequila in a glass. She took a sip and carried it toward the bathroom. "Don't be a baby. It was a *single* couch. Arturo's an old friend and I told him all about both of you. He was interested." She went into the bathroom but left the door open. Jack followed her.

"Sure he was," Jack said. "That's why he turned that big jerk loose when I came over to get you."

"You came over? When?"

"Last night. Where do you think I got this!" Jack was yelling and pointing at his black eye.

Irene paused in coming out of the bathroom to study it. "Put some ice on it," she said. "You and your scenes." As she went over to the tequila bottle she looked at Martin, who was still packing. "Christ, Marty, you look absolutely cooked." She looked at Jack. "You too, Jack. Didn't you know better than to stay out all afternoon in this sun? Now I feel guilty. You two babies are helpless without me."

"Can it," Jack said. "Get packed or give us the money. We're leaving."

For the next twenty minutes they argued. Irene was for staying another day. Arturo would have them all over to the big hotel. Martin wavered between staying and wanting to go. All he knew for sure was that he felt like hell. About leaving Jack was adamant. He also felt bad, with his sunburn and sore eye, but he felt wounded, too. After the disaster of the night before, he needed to assert himself, to get his own way. He needed to bend what was left of their trip to his will.

"Oh, hell," Irene said, throwing her bag on the bed. "Let's just go home."

At the motel office Irene phoned the hotel next door and left a message for Arturo, then they rode a cab to the train station.

At the station they found that they would have to wait until ten that night to catch the next train north. Irene bought the tickets, and at Jack's insistence reserved a sleeper berth. They stored their luggage in a locker and went into town to kill the rest of the day.

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In town they hit a couple of bars and drank tequila, which took the edge off the sunburn and sore eye and Irene's hangover. When Martin suggested they take in a movie, Jack and Irene agreed. It would be cool and dark there. They wouldn't have to talk to each other, and it might be fun to see a Mexican movie. Irene got directions from the bartender to the only moviehouse in town, and they went out to find it.

The moviehouse was huge and dark but was not air-conditioned. The air was stuffy, and they found seats in the left section halfway down towards the screen. As they settled in the screen was filled with a black and white newsreel. The sound was too loud, and Jack thought that the seats and aisles smelled of urine. They moved twice, but the smell was the same. Jack gave up and tried to follow the newsreel, but to his ear the loud Spanish was grating, the events foreign. Only the sporting news with its bullfight rundown held his interest. The main feature turned out to be a black and white Mexican western, and none of them needed to follow the story to see that the acting was bad. The film was violent with a lot of gringos falling to the blazing sixguns of Mexican cowboys.

Leaving the moviehouse they were relieved to see that it was already dark. The weather had cooled considerably. It was pleasant being out in it, and because they still had plenty of time they decided to walk back to the train station. Passing a store Jack said they should pick up some supplies for the trip. They went in and bought a litre of vodka, hot sauce, and a bottle of Bloody Mary mix. Irene tossed a bag of chips on the counter, too.

By the time they got back to the station it was after nine. They got their luggage out of the locker and went out to the loading platform to wait for the train. They stacked their bags together on the concrete, and Jack put the paper bag full of booze down, too. As Irene went off to find a bathroom, Martin and Jack smoked cigarettes and stayed with the luggage.

"Martin, I'll tell you the truth," Jack said. "Mexico gives me the creeps."

"Naw, it's not Mexico. It's Irene. It's Arturo. It's this goddamn sunburn and that fist you walked into. It's a room full of roaches. It's shrimp still in their shells. It's bad movies and these trains that should have been melted down for scrap fifty years

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ago. You like the little amenities is all, the routines you can count on."

"I guess that's it," Jack said. "But how can you feel for a country where you can't drink the water?"

"There's lots of places back in the States where you're better off not drinking the water," Martin said.

"Yeah, I guess so. It's Irene. Something stupid always happens when she gets a big idea and we go along with it. We'll probably have to go looking for jobs when we get home."

"Well," Martin said, "we can always paint houses." They laughed.

"Yeah," Jack said, "and until then we can drink all night on the train."

The train arrived as Irene came back out on the platform. Martin picked up his bag and Irene's and the two of them boarded the train. Jack slung his bag over his shoulder, and as he did so the sack of booze tipped over and smacked the concrete. A spreading wet stain worked its way through the brown paper and oozed out. Jack knelt down and looked in the sack. The vodka and the mix had both shattered. He cursed, fishing out the bag of chips, and ran for the train as the whistle blew.

On board he broke the bad news to Martin and Irene. Irene glared at him and stalked down the aisle to find their sleeper. Martin looked depressed and shrugged.

"It figures," Jack said.

All through the night in their cramped compartment they dozed and played gin. At five in the morning they passed through Hermosillo, the last stop before Nogales, and an hour later Jack went out to stretch his legs.

He walked through seven cars to the end of the train, then started back. Three cars from the end the aisle was blocked by three brown uniformed Federales. One held his rifle at the ready while another entered the compartment of two long-haired American teenagers. A fat hatless soldier with a pock-marked face and sergeant's stripes on his shirt-sleeve stood in the doorway of the compartment. As Jack stopped to watch the scared teenagers were brought out into the aisle and forced to kneel down facing the wall. Jack felt an overwhelming impulse to turn around and run. *No*, he told himself, *don't run. But get*

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out of this. He felt his heart speed up. He was sweating. He told himself not to look too closely, not to make eye contact with the sergeant, especially. As he wriggled by the teenagers and the Federales in the aisle with his head down, he glanced into the compartment where the other soldier was rifling through luggage. As he did so the sergeant's eye met his. Jack hurried past, but he could feel the sergeant step out of the compartment and stare at him. As Jack neared the door leading to the next car he froze at the command *Halt*! Turning around he saw the sergeant coming up the aisle. The sergeant got up in his face and barked a question in Spanish. His breath smelled of garlic. Jack was silent. The sergeant barked again, louder this time. "No comprende," Jack said. The sergeant repeated his question, louder still. "Los Estados Unidos!" Jack screamed in the sergeant's face. Jack turned on his heel and pushed through the door, leaving the sergeant standing there with his mouth hanging open.

Now you've done it, Jack told himself, and as soon as he entered the next car he ran. He did not stop until he was back in the sleeper with Martin and Irene. Slamming the door behind him, he labored to catch his breath while he told them what happened.

"You idiot!" Irene said. "Provoke them and they'll throw you in jail. They'll put us all away."

"Let's just stay in here until we cross the border." Martin said. Maybe they won't find us."

For five hours they fretted in the close quarters of the sleeper. Once they were terrified by a firm rap on the door, but it was only another ticket-taker with poor timing. Exhausted with worry, Jack drifted off thinking *never again, not this way*. When he woke up Martin was tapping his knee.

"Nogales," Martin said. "Let's get out of here."

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MADISON SMARTT BELL

The Moon Will Be Bleeding

It's a long time been said
That the moon will be bleeding
Moon will be bleeding on that day . . .
Oh sinner, where'll you stand
on that day. . . .

—traditional

They had decided, or Laidlaw had decided for them, all to go in the truck. Tiffany sat in the middle, with her feet up on the hump of the transmission, the place where Laidlaw usually rode his banjo. She felt crowded, though in truth she wasn't. Without the instruments, there was plenty of room for three, room enough for her to sit and even shift around a little without brushing shoulders with either one of the others.

It had got a little warmer, not all that much. Laidlaw and Watson had both opened their windows to let out smoke, creating a chill little cross-breeze. Over the dashboard, straight across from Tiffany, a small orb of steam had formed on the windshield; it would neither expand nor shrink.

Laidlaw had brought a cup of coffee along, and when he started up the ramp onto I-65, she reached up to steady it. Once he had fit the truck into the traffic, she took a sip and wedged the cup back on the angle of the dashboard where it had been. The coffee was bitter, and nearly stone cold.

"Go on and finish it off if you want to," Laidlaw said.

"Thanks the same," Tiffany said. "But I really don't." The conversation ended there. A green sign giving the distance to Birmingham flicked by on the right, pulling her eyes around in that direction. Watson was slumped over against the right-hand door, staring moodily out the window, his head piled up into one of his hands. Smoke sputtered toward the vent from a cigarette he held there behind his head, seeming to come straight out of his close-cut hair. What fun, Tiffany thought crossly, turning to face the crown of the road again. Once more

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she had that irksome feeling that she had just interrupted something. It seemed so much as if she had just blundered into this joyride by accident that she had to work to remember it had all been arranged.

Up ahead, the road's cut stretched on, broad, bland, and entirely uninteresting. Past the Franklin get-off, they lost most of the other traffic, and the road spun endlessly out ahead of them, vacant all the way to the sky. Laidlaw reached down and put on the radio: some crackly local station giving the farm report in row after dreary row of numbers. After about five minutes, Tiffany shut the radio off. Laidlaw cut his eyes toward her, but had nothing to say. The sky stood dully before them, climbing straight up from the horizon. You could not have called it either overcast or clear; it was simply flat, and colorless but for a faint metallic gleam. When they had accomplished thirty or forty miles down the road, it began to pulse at them at half-minute intervals, long strokes of heat lightning interrupting the daylight like some enormous photographer's flash.

"Looks like heavy weather up ahead," Watson said.

"Yep," Laidlaw said. "We'll be running right into it, I'm afraid."

Although this was the first conversational opportunity that had occurred for some time, Tiffany could think of nothing to add to it. When the truck had rushed about ten more miles toward the rapidly darkening sky, she cleared her throat and spoke.

"If it's supposed to be around an hour to this place," she said, "then we must have passed it a little while back."

"I know, I know," Laidlaw said. "Sometimes it looks kind of shorter when you look at it on the map."

"Well," she said. "Are we going clear to Alabama, or what?" She saw Laidlaw opening his mouth to speak but she never did hear what he said because at that instant the sky ahead of them was cloven in two by a bolt of lightning as wide as the whole road. It was unbearably bright and shockingly silent, and when it was gone it seemed suddenly dark as night everywhere around them. The smash and roll of the thunder following rocked her head back, as the truck lunged forward into a wall of rain. The water was coming down practically solid; it was as if they had driven into a lake. Laidlaw was flipping on wipers

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and lights, but neither seemed to be a whole lot of help. Two spears of lightning came down at more or less the same time on either side of the highway, though it was harder to see them now, through all the rain. When the thunder had faded out again, Tiffany poked Laidlaw with the point of her elbow.

"Get off the road," she said to him. "No use trying to keep driving in this."

"Hell, I can't even tell where the road is to get off of it," Laidlaw said. But he lifted his foot from the gas and the truck veered to the right and coasted to a stop. There was a click as Watson closed his vent. Laidlaw left the motor running, just set the parking brake.

"I do hope we don't get rear-ended by some other fool," he said.

"I believe we're on the shoulder all right," Watson said, peering through the sheets of rain sliding over his window. "Near as I can tell."

"But will that help us enough?" Laidlaw said, turning around to face the other two, his grin eerily illumined by another flash of lightning. In the wake of this bolt, there came a crash on a different tone.

"There goes somebody's big old tree, or something," Watson said. He was smiling too, she noticed.

"Yeah," Laidlaw said. "Or barn, even. Suppose we'll be next?"

"Supposed to be safe, sitting on rubber tires," Tiffany said.

"That's what they tell you," Watson said. "I always did wonder if it was the truth."

"Here's where you stand to find out," Laidlaw said. Tiffany was tensed for the next lightning strike, but none came. Instead there was some negligible change in the pace of the downpour, and it seemed to get a little lighter inside the cab. Still you couldn't see an inch past the windshield, though the wipers lashed frantically back and forth.

"Praise the Lord," Watson said, with a short barking laugh. "I do believe spring is here." He dipped into his jacket pocket and came out with a half-pint bottle of Bacardi 151 and held it out in the flat of his hand. Tiffany noticed how neatly the curve of the bottle fit within the borders of his palm, noticed too that the pink paper strip of the state seal was as yet unbroken. She shook her head at it and Watson leaned across her to push the

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bottle nearer Laidlaw, who took it and wrenched off the cap. After he had drunk he leaned forward across the steering wheel and expelled his breath in a long wheeze.

"God*damn*, but that's hot," he said, passing the bottle back. "It's not even a liquid, it's a gas."

"You're getting there," Watson said.

"Cork that good when you get through with it," Laidlaw said. "The smell alone must be drawing state troopers from miles around."

Watson took a short drink, cleared his throat, and dropped the bottle back in his pocket. Laidlaw reached up above the sun visor, pulled down a map of the state and unfolded it. After a minute he frowned and slapped the map back shut.

"The turn-off ought to be somewhere right around here," Laidlaw said. "Hope I didn't go by it in this rain. Might even be able to see it from here, if we could see anything. Looks like we're apt to be late."

"Ain't no helping that," Watson said. Laidlaw slumped down in his seat and lit a cigarette. The smoke swirled around his head in a lazy spiral, clinging to him in the damp atmosphere. A little rivulet of water was running in through his vent and dripping onto his knee, but he didn't seem to notice or mind it.

"These hard rains don't usually keep up all that long," Tiffany said. Laidlaw rolled his eyes at her and slid further down in his seat. But in another five minutes the rain had stopped as sharply as a tap shut off, and sunshine was cutting through the water-slicked windows of the cab.

"How do you like that?" Laidlaw said, taking off the brake. Nobody bothered to answer him. He drove on down the interstate another couple of miles and got off onto a small secondary road that curved through a series of wide pastures. Tiffany turned her head to watch the fields slipping by. Before the rain there had been patches of snow still hanging on, but now they had all been washed clean away, and the grey of the fields was beginning to come up in green.

Laidlaw came to a T intersection, hesitated, then made a right turn. Woods came down to the edge of the road they were driving on now. Every quarter-mile or so, there appeared a mailbox and a short drive leading up to a house trailer set on a block foundation or, more rarely, a single-level prefab house.

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None of the dwellings looked particularly new, and yet they all seemed just to have been torn into the woods, a raw look to them Tiffany supposed they would never lose.

Laidlaw came to a crossroads and pulled to the side of the road, before a reddish frame building with a good part of the paint peeling off. Opposite them was a square concrete filling station, with the old-fashioned rounded-off pumps. On the far corner stood a barn-sized white clapboard structure with a square turret or steeple that suggested it might once have been a church, though its door and windows were boarded over now. Across from that was a sort of general store with two or three cars parked in front of it. The red building where they'd parked themselves was marked with a big tin Coca-Cola sign over the door. There was a space on the sign for the name of the business, but it was mostly rusted out, and only the word CAFE was dimly discernible on it. The building was not otherwise distinguished except for a neon Budweiser sign which glowed in one of the small square windows.

"Are we lost, or just out of gas?" Tiffany said.

"No," Laidlaw said. "This should be the place."

"This?"

"I'm not promising," Laidlaw said. "The roads ain't marked any too good out here, if you notice. But if that cafe is the Redbird Cafe, then it's where I was supposed to meet the guy. About a half an hour ago, of course."

As Tiffany swung her head around to peer at the sign again, the door underneath it opened and a policeman came out and paused on the top step. At first glance she took him for a state trooper, because he wore that same kind of broad-brimmed hat, but then she saw that his uniform was blue instead of tan, with a gold stripe running up the trouser seam. He wore his gun on a wide cartridge belt, each shell gleaming as if it had been freshly polished that morning.

"That's one hell of a police for a town this size," Watson said.

"You suppose he's local or state?" Tiffany said.

"Got to be local," Laidlaw said. "That ain't a state car." In fact the car was a regular blue-and-white, a city-style police car looking very much out of place such a long way from any city. The policeman had come down the steps and walked over to the the driver's side of the car, but instead of getting into it, he

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folded his arms along the roof and favored them with another long gaze. After a moment Tiffany grew tired of looking back at him, and found her eyes drawn to the long aerial set in the center of the trunk lid, or rather to its tip, where there fluttered a miniature American flag and beneath it a Confederate flag the same size.

"He sure is getting a mighty good look at us," Watson said.

"I'd count on him knowing us again," Laidlaw said. "If he don't think he knows us from before. Keep that firewater out of sight. I'll be back in a second." He got out, slapping the door shut behind him, and went over to the police car. For a moment he and the officer conferred, the policeman speaking out of the side of his mouth, never shifting his eyes from the cab of the truck. Then Laidlaw went up the steps and into the cafe. In a minute he had come back out, in the company of a beer-bellied man who wore a green coverall and, incongruously, fancy cowboy boots and a new-looking Stetson hat. The stranger strolled over to join the policeman, turning to stare across at the truck himself. Laidlaw came over and rapped on Watson's window, and Watson rolled it down.

"This shouldn't take all that long," Laidlaw said. "Man's going to just ride me over to that place right quick. You all just stay in the car and I'll be back in about a half an hour at the outside."

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Tiffany said.

"They got a sundown thing," Laidlaw said, looking not at her but at Watson, his hands tightening white on the top of the door. "Look, I didn't know—"

Watson opened his mouth, but closed it without saying anything at all. His hand floated upward and then fell back onto the dashboard with the dead weight of a dropped brick.

"Just stay in the car," Laidlaw repeated. "I'll be back right quick." He turned sharply and went back toward the other two men. Half-gaping, Tiffany watched him and the man in the coverall both climb into an old Chevrolet with fins. The car backed out, gasping, turned by the abandoned church, and disappeared. The policeman had kept on staring at the truck throughout, but after another half minute he gave his head a long slow shake, got in the car and sped off in the opposite

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direction, fast enough that the two flags on the aerial whipped wildly back and forth. Tiffany turned to Watson.

"Do you understand this any better than I do?"

"Can't tell nothing about it, missy," Watson said sourly. "Boss man say we spose to stay in the car is the only thing *I* know."

"Don't give me that," Tiffany said. Watson turned away from her and wound his window up. He reached out to the dashboard and drummed his fingers on it for a few seconds and then stopped.

"What's got into everybody all of a sudden?" Tiffany said. "I'd really love to know what's going on."

Watson shifted around in her direction again. His eyes passed across her and came to rest on something else.

"Them as don't know, you just can't tell'm," he said, in the same artificially slurred tone. Tiffany sighed.

"Everything's a riddle, right?" she said. "So I give up, you can tell me the answer."

"Ain't no answer," Watson said, in his ordinary speaking voice. Tiffany said nothing. She stretched herself out a little, moving into Laidlaw's seat behind the wheel, and looked out the driver's side window. The service doors of the garage opposite were open and two men were studying the underside of a mud-streaked white Ford which was raised on the lift. Otherwise there was no activity, not the least hint of movement anywhere around the crossroads.

"Bitter Springs," she said, shaking her head.

"Not too much of a place, is it?" Watson said. They let a period of silence pass, fifteen or twenty minutes' worth, perhaps. It was dank inside the cab, and getting colder by the minute. Tiffany crossed her arms over her chest and squeezed the edges of her body.

"Damn, it's cold."

"You had a key to this thing we might turn on the motor and warm up that way," Watson said.

"Wouldn't that be nice?" Tiffany said. "But he tore out of here so fast I never had a chance to get it from him."

"Boss man *always* know what's best," Watson said, reverting to the slur.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Tiffany said. "Rodney, don't you

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think we could get along a little bit better than this? So long as we're going to be stuck together?"

"*You* ain't stuck *nowhere*," Watson said, staring out through the windshield. "You can go where you feel like and do what you please. I mostly just do what I'm told, myself."

"Well, I wish I knew what was bothering you," Tiffany said. "If it was all up to me, I would just let you alone, stay out of your way, you know? I mean, if you don't want to fool with me, that's your business. I wouldn't even have to know the reason. But it does make a difference to *him*, you know, so what I want you to tell me is, what have I been doing wrong?"

"Nothing," Watson said, the response pat and toneless. But he turned around to face her head-on, looking straight into her eyes for once, stroking the line of his jaw with one hand as he studied her.

"I never knew it was bothering you," he said. "I guess I hadn't give it all that much thought."

"Well, I've *had* to," Tiffany said.

"I see," Watson said, musingly. "Well, I guess I'm sorry. If I been making you feel funny, or what have you."

"I'm not after an apology," Tiffany said. "I'm just looking maybe for things to improve."

"All right," Watson said. He dipped the rum bottle out of his pocket, uncapped it and took a drink, then held the bottle out to her. "Have a drink on it," he said.

Tiffany sipped, just wetting her tongue. The liquor fumed into her whole head, radiant, white-hot.

"God," she said, giving him the bottle back.

"It's wicked, sure enough," Watson said. "But it ought to warm you up a little."

"You wouldn't consider using something a little milder?"

"This here is the best value for the money," Watson said, smiling a little as he pocketed the bottle. Tiffany laughed, the laugh blending into a shiver that ran fast and hard all through her.

"You are cold," Watson said. His hand drifted out toward her shoulder and halted in the air a short distance away.

"You can touch me," Tiffany said irritably. "I'm not going to break or burn you or anything."

Watson's hand came all the way down, like a helicopter

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landing. He squeezed the bone of her shoulder once quickly and drew his hand back away.

"There you go," Tiffany said. "I'm flesh and blood the same as you. No need for us to act like a couple of ghosts."

"If you say so," Watson said. "You really are getting pretty cold, though."

"Don't you know it," Tiffany said. "Where's he got lost at, anyhow, he should have been back here ten minutes ago." It took some concentration now, to keep her teeth from chattering. "This is stupid, what are we doing out here waiting to freeze? Come on let's go inside, get a cup of coffee and warm up."

Watson reached out again, as if he would restrain her, but she had already got out of the cab and banged the door shut. Hands jammed in her pockets, she went quickly up the steps and shouldered through the door of the cafe. It was only a small room, panelled with pine planks varnished to an orange shade, and it was very warm in there, almost steaming. There were just two square tables and a single booth fit into a cranny of the wall, and at the rear a high counter with a coffee pot on it, next to some big gallon jars full of things like red-hots and pickled eggs. No one seemed to be attending it at the moment. At the table under the window with the beer sign, four men were sitting, all of them fat in a greasy bloated way that puffed up their faces and slit their eyes. They looked enough alike to have all been related, and were similarly dressed, in work pants and white T-shirts, none too clean. Three of them were involved in some murmured colloquy and the fourth stared at Tiffany dully, looking through her it seemed, while his thumb idly riffled the edge of a deck of cards which sat on the table amongst coffee cups and a couple of beer bottles.

She turned her back to them and sat down in the booth, facing the door. Her hands had gotten painfully stiff out in the cold, and she spread them on the table top and began to flex the feeling back into them. It seemed that Watson was not coming in, and that depressed her, just when she thought she had finally opened a crack in his reserve. But then the door opened and he appeared, hesitating on the threshold, then coming quickly over to sit down across from her.

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"Look a here," Tiffany said. "I really would like it if we could be better friends."

"All right," Watson said, his tone sure enough, though his eyes seemed somewhat uneasy. "I reckon I'd be willing to give it a shot."

"Shake on it?" Tiffany put out her hand. Again she sensed some odd restlessness to him; he seemed to be hovering a couple of inches out of his seat. Then his hand came out and grasped hers and quickly let it go. She watched it settle onto the table, a tan hand on yellow formica. The index finger rose and tapped sharply three times, the sound of it strikingly loud, maybe because it seemed to have grown oddly still elsewhere in the room.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe they don't wait on tables round here, we might be supposed to serve ourselves."

"Normally speaking, we don't serve niggers at all," a voice said conversationally from the table behind. Tiffany almost turned around, and then thought better of it. It was plain enough now what the trouble was, and it was making her feel fairly stupid. She locked her eyes onto Watson's; his face was blank as stone. Behind, there was a noise of chair legs scraping on the floor.

"Course, we might be able to find *something* that would suit a special pair like you." The speaker strolled around into her field of vision and propped himself up on the high back of Watson's seat. A second man leaned down over the back of hers, near enough for her to catch a faint smell of stale sweat and tobacco. The voice came just at the edge of her ear.

"We just been kindly wondering. . . ." it said. "If you all was related, or just good friends."

"Friends is what I bet," the man by Watson said. "*Real* good friends, now ain't that right?" Tiffany looked up to meet the pair of flat eyes, pale green and oddly depthless.

"You know, we seen you swapping spit on that bottle out there," the one behind her said. "So we figured it had to be one or t'other."

A third voice spoke from the table in back of her, where she couldn't see which one it was.

"Anybody would drink after a nigger would do most any-

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thing else with one too, more'n likely. Ain't that what you would expect?"

Holding the eyes of the man in front of her as well as she could, Tiffany smiled, a bright hostess smile. She had been around such people a time or two before, and she knew that they could be shamed. There would be something she could say, a magic group of words that would shrink them down to their proper size, turn them back into children again. If she had been on home ground she would have known the phrasing right away, but in this unfamiliar place she was unsure of it. All she knew for certain was that she had to do something and do it quick. Watson looked like he was about to do something himself, and if he did she thought they would kill him at least and maybe her too.

"Gentlemen." She had not seen how Laidlaw got into the room, but he was there. The man who stood behind Watson's seat straightened up and swung lazily around to include him in the group.

"Hey there, feller," he said. "These here people belong to you?"

"Yes sir, they do." Laidlaw's head was lowered, his eyes set somewhere around the other man's chest. "I hope they hadn't been causing you no trouble."

"Not beyond what we could handle if we had to."

"Yes sir," Laidlaw said. "I don't doubt that."

"Maybe you might like to see it," the man said reflectively. "You know, how we might handle this type of a thing."

"No sir, I don't think we need to," Laidlaw said. "I expect we'll all probably just head on home."

"Is that what you expect?" The man's hand rose and stroked outward as if he meant to thump Laidlaw on the chest, but Laidlaw was no longer where he had been. Tiffany had not seen him move, it was if he had been invisibly translated from one spot to another one just out of reach, so that the other man's hand swept through a curve of empty space and slapped to rest against his thigh. She herself slid to the edge of the booth so the table would not be much in her way if she decided to move somewhere quickly.

"Yeah," the man said, frowning down at his empty hand. His

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tone had changed; the interest was dulling out of it. "That might be your best plan."

"Yes sir," Laidlaw said. "Well, we thank you." He turned toward Watson and spoke more sharply. "Rodney, you go get in the truck." Watson stood up and walked stiff-legged to the door and through it. Laidlaw jerked his thumb at Tiffany, who got up from her seat. Guiding her with a hand set in the small of her back, he came out of the door behind her.

"Nigger, don't let the sun go down on you in Bitter Springs," Watson said. "Best not even let it shine on you there, matter of fact."

Laidlaw's hands were rigid on the wheel. His jaw muscles poked through his cheeks in knotty little twists. Overall, Tiffany thought, he looked about the way she felt.

"I wouldn't be driving so damn fast," Watson said. "Unless you want to bring down that bad country fuzz on your head."

"Why didn't you just stay in the truck like I told you?" Laidlaw said through gritted teeth.

"Your girlfriend decided she just had to have a cup of coffee."

"*Go to Hell*," Tiffany said, not quite sure which one of them she meant. "Why didn't we just get the hell out of there when we saw what we were into?"

"Because it was too late by that time," Laidlaw shouted. "I had Mr. Policeman already telling me what I should do. Leave you all sit in the car and get my business fixed and get out after that. You think I *wanted* to hang around there?"

"Who knows?" Watson said. "But I'm waiting on you to tell me what goodhearted people all them were, deep down inside."

"They were nothing but trash," Laidlaw said.

"You surely did pull the wool for them, though," Watson said. "You did it real good. *Yassuh. Nawsuh.* Man, you got it *down*."

"I can do it if I have to," Laidlaw said. "To keep from ending up somewhere nobody wouldn't ever find my body. I could also stay put somewhere, if somebody told me to."

"But what I really want to know is, did you enjoy it?" Watson said, pursuing his own train of thought.

"Not all that much," Laidlaw said.

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"Well, but you looked like you just *loved* it." Watson laughed. "Hell, you should have been a nigger yourself." He opened his bottle and took a long pull. "Come on, let's have us a drink on that thought."

Laidlaw accepted the bottle into his right hand, looked at it for a second, and smashed it over the edge of his door. It was the same easy movement he would use to break an egg on the rim of the skillet, and it looked so natural that Tiffany hardly absorbed the meaning of it until he took his left hand off the wheel too and shucked a shower of bloody glass from the palm of his right, scattering it out the open window. In an abstract disinterested fashion she saw that the truck was out of control, bouncing along the shoulder; then Laidlaw took the wheel again and wrenched it back into its lane. A slim trickle of blood was winding down the inside of his forearm.

"So what did you want me to do, kill them?" he said.

"Yes," Watson said. "You should have killed them. People like that need to be killed."

Laidlaw turned and looked at him. To Tiffany, this look was completely indescribable, not because it had some special character, but because it had none at all. All the same it was a kind of look she would have been pleased never to see again. He kept it up for a long time. Again the possibility of a wreck seemed likely, yet she still felt that it didn't really interest her all that much.

"I've sworn off killing people," Laidlaw said.

"Well, I call that a crying shame," Watson said. "Because you were damn good at it."

Laidlaw turned his face back down the road, lifted his leg, and stamped on the accelerator as if he had in mind to crush it. The truck leapt forward so hard they were all thrown back in their seats. Tiffany let her head loll back, watching through slit eyes as the horizon screamed up toward them. So this is what it feels like, was all she could think now, not to care what happens to you.

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STEVE YARBROUGH

Born Again

Lela was sitting on her stool, watching R.V. Eldridge shoot pool, when Sonny walked in. It was the second time she'd seen his face in two days after not seeing it for three months. Yesterday, she'd picked up *The Enterprise Tocsin* and there he was on page one, him and Sheriff Sessums escorting Walter Pierce into the courthouse. Walter and the sheriff were both over six feet tall, and something about their cumulative size and Sonny's lack of it suggested it was Sonny, not Walter, who was headed for a trial.

Sonny said, "Hey, Lela."

"Hi."

R.V. laid down his cue stick. "Hey, Sonny," he said. His voice was loud and thick. He hung around drinking every afternoon now that he'd been laid off at the catfish plant. He had something on his mind besides pool and beer, but Lela pretended not to know it. "Hear you arrested a royal son of a bitch," he said.

"I ain't no genealogist. I don't make judgements about lineage. He's a dope salesman's all I know."

"Folks couldn't believe it. Sonny run Walter in. Heard it everywhere I went."

"Guess that proves your ears work."

"My eyes work too."

"That's miraculous, R.V."

"Tell you what my eyes picked up last weekend." R.V. leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. "Me and Tim Horn was over at the When Club in Leland when Walter strolled in with a little girl he'd filched from a dorm at Delta State. There was a loud band playing The Dire Straits. Evidently Walter's partial to a different kind of music. He handed the guitar player a bill between tunes and ordered him to play 'Whiskey Bent and Hell Bound.' This kid was a little tie-dyed type about your size. He said, 'Sorry, man,' and Walter stiff-armed him backwards off

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the bandstand. The bouncer came tearing out of the backroom, ready to slice meat, but when he saw who'd started the trouble, he just stopped and said, 'Mr. Pierce, I have to ask you to quit that.' "

Sonny said, "That's a nice tale, R.V. You get tired of being unemployed, maybe you can cut a record of stories like Jerry Clower." He mounted a stool, laid a dollar on the bar, and said, "Got any coffee, Lela?"

He told her later that he'd like to come over.

Lela left work at six and went home.

For the past two years she'd lived in the trailer park behind Weber's Truckstop. The trailer and the park and the truckstop belonged to Beer Smith, the old man who also owned the bar where she worked. She thought of herself as one of his reclamation projects. The guy who sang in the bar every night was a paraplegic who'd been hurt years ago working construction. The manager of the trailer park, a spindly man named Turner, had once owned the park with his brother. One day, when they were working on a jacked-up double-wide, crawling around underneath it, something happened—no one ever knew what, least of all Turner—and the mobile home slid off its support; Turner rolled free, but his brother didn't. Turner's hair turned white in two weeks, he refused to leave his office, all the tenants moved out, and by the time Beer bought the place the weeds were hip-high. Turner did a stint in Whitfield. When they released him Beer took him on.

Lela herself used to drink way too much and, from time to time, she went crazy. When that happened, she'd dress herself up in skimpy clothes, paint her face with every beauty-aid she owned, and when she finally had herself looking like a resident of a science-fiction whorehouse, she'd drive to a truckstop in some place like Winona or Senatobia—it had to be at least forty miles from home, which at the time was Yazoo City—and let the first fellow who showed interest pick her up.

She'd been married once to a long-haul trucker named Lee Starnes. They had their arguments, but he never hit her and to her knowledge he never slept around, so she thought the marriage was a decent one. Then one day he failed to come home. Two weeks later a money order arrived in the mail along

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with a picture postcard. The description in the upper left-hand corner of the card was blotted out. Beneath it Lee had written *Guess where*? The envelope containing the card and the money order had been mailed from Winfield, Kansas, but the picture on the card was a street scene from some big city—lots of lights and tall buildings and a movie marquee, advertising something called *The Night of Shooting Stars*. She got a money order and a postcard once a month. Always he crossed out the caption and wrote *Guess where*?

Sonny's pickup was parked near her trailer. He'd doffed his uniform and was wearing jeans and a white T-shirt. He sat on her steps, looking off across the cotton field; a few hundred yards away, on the other side, the high school football team was practicing, and you could occasionally hear pads popping, the hoarse curse of a coach.

She walked over and sat down beside him. "What've you been up to?" she said. "Besides busting Walter."

"Nothing much. Actually quite a bit." He studied his palms. His hands were small and smooth, callus-free. She had not known many hands like those.

"Such as what?"

"Well, I made my peace with Evie."

"I figured that."

"I'm back living with her and the kids."

"Figured that too."

"Plus I got baptized."

"That I hadn't figured."

He stood and jammed his hands into his hip pockets. She'd never seen anyone else do that. It signified Sonny was nervous.

He said, "It's not something I set out to do."

"Don't apologize."

"I'm not apologizing. I'm just stating a fact. I don't know hardly anybody I like that goes to church."

She asked him how it happened. He said that one evening he went by the house to take some groceries to Evie. They ended up arguing like always, and like always he demanded a divorce. This time she surprised him, said yes. But she told him he'd first have to go see the new minister out at Fairview.

"Only thing that could make me visit a preacher," he told Lela, "was a chance to get shed of Evie. I called him up and

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ferried my ass right out there." He said he disliked the preacher immediately, first because he was a preacher but also because he was large and analytic. He commenced to lecture Sonny on God's Law—"You're a lawman," he said at one point, "yet you trample God's statutes"—and after a few minutes of that, Sonny said, "You sound like a damn insurance salesman." He said the preacher turned red, swept papers off his desk, and said, "That's right, you little son of a bitch, I am. And you could use some." He said Sonny reminded him of Barney Fife, he was just a little pest with a badge, and someday somebody mean and abrupt was apt to put a barrel to his belly.

"And you fell for that?" Lela said.

"Not for a day or two." Sonny paced a patch of ground near the steps. "I never told you this, but my uncle used to be the sheriff up in Panola County. Back in the fifties, when it was dry, he made a deal with all the bootleggers. He'd raid them once a month for ten percent of whatever was on hand. One day he headed out in the woods to this old fellow's still, and the guy drilled about sixty holes in him. Last thing in the world I ever wanted to be was a cop, but that's what happened. Brother Wilson pushed the right button."

Lela felt tired, and the conversation was tiring her worse. She'd lost men to other women, to the highway, and now to Jesus Christ.

"You've got a wife anyhow," she said. "Kids too. I knew that from the outset. It's good you got saved."

"I didn't set out to," he said.

Similarity had seeped into her days.

Most mornings she woke groggy from the sleeping pills she took. They were a new brand, her doctor claimed they left no aftereffects, but she knew they did. One morning she walked to Mr. Quik, bought the Memphis paper, went home and ate breakfast, then returned to Mr. Quik to buy the paper again. When the clerk asked if she'd lost the first one, she recalled having bought it; she even thought maybe she'd read it. She forgot phone calls, few and treasured though they were. She stopped taking the pills for a time, but without them she couldn't sleep.

She'd lie around the trailer until lunchtime, reading or

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watching TV. At noon she went to work. At six she got off. Sometimes in the evenings she'd hang around and drink a beer, but if she had more than one, Beer Smith would glare at her over the bar and venture some nasty remarks. So she'd usually go home, eat supper, read or watch TV again, take the pills and drop off. It had been like that since the thing with Sonny ended.

One evening, while she was halfway watching a game show, she heard a car pull into her yard. She peeped out the window. It was a yellow MG. The guy at the wheel wore sunglasses. When he got out, she saw that he was dressed to play tennis; the handle of his racket leaned against the passenger door. He pulled off his glasses and walked over to the trailer.

"Hi," he said when she opened the door. "Can I come in?"

"What for?"

He grinned. "I knew you'd ask that," he said. "I'm Wade Wilson. I think maybe Sonny mentioned me."

"You're the preacher?"

"If I say yes, does that mean I can't come in?"

"No," she said. "Come on."

He followed her into the living room. She switched off the TV, then stood by the set, not knowing what to do. She gestured at the couch and told him to have a seat.

He sat down and crossed his legs. "Sometimes people wonder," he said, "whether or not they should offer me a beer. If the day's hot and the beer's cold, the answer's yes."

"I don't have any. I've got some Cokes."

She opened one for him, set it on her coffee table, and sat down in her lone armchair.

His eyes roved over her furnishings, then rotated slowly toward the ceiling; they lingered on a water stain. "I grew up in one of these," he said. He told her he'd been raised down close to Belzoni, his father had farmed fish before anyone else, and the family's trailer had stood near the fish pond.

"Right out in the middle of an open field," he said.

"That's not the best place to park one."

"You bet it's not," he said. "My father lived in fear of the elements. Every time the weather bureau issued a tornado watch, he'd make my mother and me crouch in the hallway, on the theory that it was the safest part of the structure. Of course,

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the whole thing would have blown to Alabama if a tornado had hit it. But he'd put us there, then he'd slip on a pair of hip-boots and a yellow raincoat with a rubber hood. He'd grab a big flashlight and a .22 pistol and head outside. I don't know if he aimed to shoot the tornado or what. Once I looked out the window and saw him standing in the yard, staring at the sky, with rain cascading down his face." Wilson shook his head. "You can't live in fear of the elements," he said.

She said, "Tornadoes don't worry me much."

"That's good. But something must."

"No, nothing does." When she heard herself say that, she recognized the truth. Nothing worried her. She didn't worry about losing anything because she owned nothing worth having; she didn't worry about losing anybody because she had no one who mattered. Loss was all that had ever worried her, and the possibility of it no longer existed.

He said, "I find that hard to believe."

The MG in the yard, the white tennis shorts, the satisfied tilt of his chin—all annoyed her. She said, "If you can't believe it, that's your problem."

He crossed his arms. "I'll tell you what I think worries you," he said. "It's the picture you see when you look at yourself. You're like a disposable diaper. You get used and tossed into the dumpster."

He had chosen the right image: trash was what she felt like, like some old throwaway item. She looked away from him. Her face had grown warm, and there was wetness in her eyes.

He said, "Listen, Lela." His voice sounded softer. "There's a doctor here in town named Lanny Pritchard. Right after I moved here, my wife found a black bubble on my right shoulder. It always bled after I jogged. She insisted I go to the doctor, and not knowing one from another, I called Lanny. He took one look at the thing and said, 'We'll take it off in the morning.' I asked if he thought it was serious, and he said, 'It could be melanoma, and if it is you've got two months to live.'

"Now I believe I know what awaits me after this world, but I've got a wife and two kids, and they're not anxious to see me go. So the week I had to wait for the biopsy was not the most joyful of my life. When the results came in, Lanny phoned me

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and said, 'It's what I thought. A particle got under your skin and crystalized. It's nothing to worry about.'

"When he said that, I said, 'Just stay where you are. I'm on my way to kick your ass.' I drove straight to his office intending to do that.

"After I got there, he told me something I'll never forget. Once he had a young woman come in with a suspicious-looking lump under her right arm. He told her they'd better remove it just to be on the safe side. He scheduled her for the next morning, but she didn't come back till eight months later. By then she had advanced lymph node cancer. She was dead in six weeks. Lanny said that now, as a rule of thumb, he tries to scare the hell out of everybody."

"I look for lumps, too," Wilson said. "I search for the sores in the spirit. We've all got them. And only one cure will suffice."

He was leaning toward her now, radiating attention.

It warmed her; she soaked in it.

She recalled a standard scene from TV westerns.

A saloon girl straightens out her kinks, washes her face, slips on a gingham dress that hides her ankles, and brazens Sunday worship. When she walks down the aisle, fifty pairs of female eyes bake her back; fifty male faces turn scarlet. Her neck is as stiff as the stock of a shotgun.

It was not like that. No one here knew her but Sonny and Wilson. Sonny's eyebrows climbed his forehead when she passed his pew. His wife was flipping through her hymnal.

The song leader, whom Lela thought she recognized from the post office, asked the congregation to stand. He led them through "Standing on the Promises." Then Wilson called on Sonny to pray.

Sonny seemed taken by surprise. His hands jumped toward his hip pockets, stopped, dangled loosely in the air, and finally homed on the back of the pew before him. "Dear God," he said. For a long time that was all. She glanced his way: his eyes were clamped shut. "Dear God," he said again. "All I can say's I'm glad we're here. I can't say why I am. I just am. Every single one of us. Amen."

Afterwards, she could not remember Wilson's sermon. She remembered Sonny's prayer, and she remembered the little

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girl who sat beside her. She was five or six, plump and blonde, and she wore a knee-length dress of the same shade of red as the center-aisle carpet. Once the sermon had started, she amused herself by playing a trick with her left thumb. She popped it in and out of its joint, again and again, apparently without pain. When she realized Lela was watching her, she grinned and sped up her routine.

Her mother saw her. She leaned over and whispered in the little girl's ear. The little girl quit for several minutes. Then she peeped at Lela, smiled, and did it once more.

Lela was trying to recall the last time she'd been so close to a child for so long. It seemed farther away than childhood itself.

She left aiming not to come back. But on Sundays there was no work, nowhere to go, nothing to do save sit on the trailer steps with Beer and watch the trucks roll in, air brakes sighing. She did her share of sighing too.

She skipped two weeks of church and returned. After the service, Wilson—whose sermon she'd found surprisingly bland—seized her hand and said she had to meet his wife.

Alice was an overweight redhead, not the lithe polite blonde she'd expected. "Hey, Lela," she said. "I'm glad you came back." She leaned closer and muttered, "Thought maybe the choir scared you off. It's that woman in the front row with a neck like a giraffe's. She thinks she's Leontyne Price. It's awful, isn't it?"

"I didn't really notice it."

"You know, you and I ought to get together. You off on Tuesday evenings?"

She picked Lela up in the MG. They drove over to the Marina in Greenville, where they ate some river catfish. Then they sat outside on the deck drinking coffee. It was mid-August now, almost time for school. Boatloads of drunk teenagers skimmed Lake Furguson in what was probably their final spate of skiing.

Alice said, "I never did that."

"Drink or ski?"

"I drank but I didn't ski. What about you?"

"I did both."

"At once?"

"Sometimes."

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"I never skied," Alice said, "because I was so big back in high school—even bigger than I am now. Once my brother and two of his friends tried to teach me over on Lake Washington. But they had a tiny old Wizard outboard on the boat, and it just couldn't pull me up. They dragged me a quarter-of-a-mile before I let go. All three of them fell out of the boat giggling."

"It would've pulled you up," Lela said, "if you'd held your legs right."

"It doesn't *bother* me anymore," Alice said. "I feel real comfortable at my present weight. Besides, Wade won't ever divorce me for being fat because he doesn't believe in divorce." She sipped her coffee, set the cup down, and said, "He wants to baptize you bad."

"I guess saving somebody like me's a real accomplishment."

"Honey, it's not accomplishment he believes in. It's the Holy Ghost."

"The Holy Ghost is hard for me to swallow."

"Me too."

"You?"

"Understand, I don't tell him that. It's not that I disbelieve it all, it's just that severe doubts beset me. But you ought to let him baptize you anyhow."

"Why?"

"It'd make him feel so good," Alice said and laughed. "Seriously, they're some nice folks at the church. We had a women's softball team in the spring and summer, and there's powder-puff football in the fall. We all get together and behave like kids. It's a great place to meet folks."

Lela didn't want to give in. "I meet folks at work."

"Can you play softball with them?"

Lela said, "They favor other forms of recreation."

Alice laughed so hard she spilled coffee on her lap, and she laughed so long that Lela finally joined in. They sat and talked until almost ten o'clock.

Three weeks later Lela made the trek to the altar. Wilson put his arm around her, and several old ladies hugged her. He scheduled her baptism for the Labor Day weekend, and he gave her a New American Standard Bible, which she carried home, laid atop the TV, and never opened.

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She spent the week before her baptism looking for a new job. She applied at Modern and Ludlow, the two small factories in town, as well as at each grocery store, the Pizza Hut, McDonald's. Women's clothing stores she ruled out: clerks there tended toward primness, which no amount of rebirthing could invest in her. She was looking forward to the powder-puff games, dinner on the grounds, cottage prayer. Decent company, in other words, and she'd claim faith in Jesus or Richard Nixon to get it.

Somebody alerted Beer Smith. Thursday evening he stomped into the bar, beating field dust from his khakis. He heaved himself onto a stool. It was a quarter before six; the bar was empty but for them.

"Well," he said, "I hear you're searching for work."

"I was going to tell you."

"Looks like you told everybody else first."

"I'm sorry, Beer."

"You want more money? Why didn't you ask?"

"It's not more money."

"You want less money? What is it?"

"I don't want to work in a bar."

"R.V.'s been pawing you, hadn't he? I got a boot was designed for his butt."

"You're not my uncle, Beer."

His face, which had been red when he came in, lost about two-thirds of its color. "That's the second time you told me that," he said. "Remember the first?"

It was two years ago at the truckstop. She'd gone there three or four nights in a row. Right across the highway stood a rundown motel, a place where ragweed reigned in the parking lot and half the bulbs on the sign were burned out, and Beer had seen her cross the road with men too many nights running. He'd sat down beside her at the counter and said, "We don't often see your kind here. Sure adds color to the place." She was so drunk she could barely see his face. He said, "Didn't you wander off from The French Quarter?"

Her tongue had melded with her palate. "Sorry," she slurred.

"You ought to be. But it's yourself that deserves an apology."

"You're not my uncle."

"If I was," he told her, "your momma and me would goddam

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hold us a summit." He walked behind the counter, filled a Styrofoam cup with coffee, then gripped her arm and led her out. Soon she was sitting on his porch swing with half-a-quart of coffee in her belly. Sobriety returned all at once in a flood. She always cried when that happened.

He watched her for a minute. Then he said, "You're not a pro, are you?"

"At some things."

"Like what?"

"Disgusting myself."

"Ain't nobody'll pay you for that. You got a job somewhere?"

She'd been working part-time at her brother's grocery store in Yazoo City. Otherwise she lived off the money orders Lee mailed her. She said, "Not really."

"You want one?"

She knew she needed a change, and she was ready to try anything anybody suggested. She could think of no solutions for herself. She said, "I guess so."

Beer drove her to Yazoo City the following day, loaded stuff in his pickup, and moved her into her trailer. She went to work tending bar. For a few days she thought he might expect her to tend to something else too. Then one evening, when they were sitting on her steps watching the sun go down, he said, "You act like you're expecting me to grab you any minute."

"Don't be mad at me," she said, "but the thought did enter my mind."

He said, "Ten years ago my daughter got shot in the head in a poolroom over in Little Rock. Her and her husband were in there together, and whoever killed her was riding by in a pickup. It was a Saturday night, and whoever it was just fired one shot in there at random, just for the hell of it, and nobody ever caught him.

"A month after that I came home one evening and found my wife cold on the couch. She'd had a heart attack. The TV was on, and I always wondered if she didn't die watching the evening news. I'll never forget one thing. There was half a glass of orange juice on the coffee table. I don't know why I remember that, but I do." He pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and said, "I don't grab women, not no more, so rest easy."

Now, staring at him across the bar, she could see how much

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she'd hurt him by looking for work. But too much of what she did in life she did to avoid disappointing someone. The someone was rarely her. The someones were the Sonnys, the Wilsons, the Beer Smiths, the nameless many she'd known. All they had to do was make eye contact, spend some words on her, act concerned. She would rather have been a woman like Alice: secure in her unlovely bulk, at home in a house, surrounded by her kids and a man dispossessed of the impulse to stray.

She said, "Beer, I'm going to church now. I got saved."

"From what?"

"I'm not sure."

His face turned red again. When he leaned over the bar, she could feel the heat from his breath. "You know what a person needs saving from?" he said. "Growing old. Getting cancer. Getting shot at the post office by some guy you've said good morning to for years. Having your throat slit by a stranger while you sleep."

His breath grew even hotter. He went on and on, piling up the phrases, constructing a list of diseases and disasters. She let the words wash over her. In her mind she was making a list of her own.

It differed fundamentally from his.

A large square of poster paper hung on the wall behind Wilson's desk. It was sectioned into blocks, one block for each Sunday of the year. Many of the blocks contained numbers, mostly 1s and 2s, though occasionally there would be a 3, and once there was a 5. He pointed at the Sunday before Labor Day, where he'd already entered a 1 for her.

It was Saturday afternoon, and they'd met to rehearse the baptism. He asked her to stand before his desk. He put one hand behind her shoulders. "When I lean you backwards," he said, "don't move your feet—if you do, we'll both end up at the bottom of the tank. Just trust me to support you. I'll press a handkerchief over your nose to keep the water out." They practiced several times and he told her she could go.

Sunday morning, near the end of the worship service, she and Alice rose together and entered the dressing room behind the baptistry. Alice, holding a towel over her forearm, watched her undress. When Lela pulled out the dress she intended to

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wear, Alice said, "The skirt's too full, Lela. It's going to ride up over your hips when the water gets under it." She laid the towel down, rummaged through her purse until she found some safety pins, then bound the skirt tightly to Lela's hips and legs.

Wilson waited at the top of the baptistry steps. He was wearing a different suit now and a pair of athletic socks. He whispered, "I'll open the door for you when I'm ready." The wooden stairs squeaked beneath his feet. She heard water slosh. He opened the door and disappeared.

The baptistry was a glass-fronted tank one level higher than the choir loft. When the red velvet curtains were drawn open, the congregation could see everything above the participants' knees. Waiting at the top of the steps, she heard Wilson in there addressing the congregation, but she could not make out his words. Soon the door opened a crack. She walked down the steps into the water.

It was lukewarm, level with her waist. She stepped into the tank. A bright light blinded her. When her eyes had adjusted, she looked out into the sanctuary. Sonny was sitting in the third row from the front. She thought she saw him nod.

Wilson's lips were moving. He raised a Bible, waved it at the congregation, then laid it on the railing. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, placed his hand on her back, and leaned her backwards.

She saw him hovering over her, the white handkerchief descending, covering her face, shutting out light, and as the water rolled over her, she reached up and gripped his arm and held on.

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TOM WAYMAN

Hard Time

The minute hand has traversed
only four notches. Or, it has climbed
from eight to eleven
quicker than I'd like.
The numbers on a digital readout
form and reform
also indifferent to who observes them.

Yet I continually
lean back from my desk
or pause on a street
to learn the time. On my deathbed
will I turn my eyes to the glowing face
of a clock in the night
to check if I'm still alive,
to see again the hour?
As I head toward my final appointment
behind me will be an age of missed connections,
of showing up before events have started,
of making people wait and waiting myself.

While I exist, though,
ingenious mechanical devices
everywhere add the seconds and display the total reached.
Each glance at these
forms one bar of a cell
in which I imprison myself.
Trees don't monitor the minutes
any more than the rest of the natural world.
But most human ventures I am part of
occur inside this jail
where I live gazing out at the universe.
Even my poems are told

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not to go on too long
since everybody hearing them
has someplace else to be
by a certain time.

Greed Suite: The Emptiness of Business

When you sell, contempt
is what you feel
People who won't buy
are stupid, short-sighted
and those who do
are suckers, easily fooled

Yet you
must be a purchaser as well

At the heart of commerce
is deceit
To take your profit
you need materials and labor
at less than their worth
which means you must convince people
to accept less

Then the product has to be sold
for more than your cost
so again men and women must be cheated
told lies, called *unreasonable*
if they balk
Profit is something
generated from nothing—
from getting other human beings
to consent

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to the prices you name
Words used to accomplish this
resemble a trait of Japanese:
in that language, a person cannot be addressed
as an equal; everyone is either your superior
or inferior, those you flatter
or patronize

There is no friendship
without obligation: your acts
the acts of others
are deposits or withdrawals
in an investment account, women and men are resources
or worthless

And except as it affects sales
there is no weather

Greed Suite: Economic Meditations

1. Dollars cannot help you.
You may need them, but dollars

do not need you. They pass
through your hands to others

or, for a time, pile up
with money you already have.

Yet money's allegiance
—besides to its own kind—

is to who sent it into the world
rather than who possesses it.

This is because dollars are the smallest part

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of the government that issued them

—a hierarchy not developed
for your benefit. Dollars are

reptiles: devoid of affection for the human race.
Though you bring them into your home

or even worship them
they do not care about your fate.

Perhaps this indifference
is why many people believe

money is the perfect means to assess worth.
But dollars, in spite of their travels,

retain a narrow outlook. They resemble the tourists
who demand identical accommodations and amenities

every place. How could these judge
what lies beyond their experience?

2. Advertising is propaganda for dollars
because advertising assures us everything is for sale.

Yet most of the cosmos has no relation to money
so the values of the dollar

are aberrant. That is why dollars ruin
most interactions between people

and between people and their planet. The dollar,
however, is only a metaphor

—an invention thought up on a Thursday afternoon
that seemed a fine idea.

Except, money behaves
like one of those robots in science fiction

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that attempts to seize control
over a space ship's crew

or the entire population of the Earth.
To save humanity, we have to

disconnect the function of judgment
money has been assigned,

become the dollar's natural enemy. We must create
a form of exchange

sympathetic to the concerns of men and women,
an artifact

less hateful and solitary.

Birds, in the Last of the Dark

Birds, in the last of the dark
or the orange dawn, start to sing
—often waking me.
Their insistent calls
each morning
are audible for blocks
from May
until I am aware of a silence
deep in the autumn.
If I am up
walking away through the silvered streets,
empty and perfect as a drawing's,
I hear different birds
also singing.

As their notes
around my tent on a beach
a hundred miles northwest of here

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pull me from dreams
of the forest.

This singing
extends like a grid
every place I am
and am not: the other life
revealed in this life,
an alternate
world
not calling to rouse us
but calling

at the edge of the light

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RICHARD HORNBY

Shakes versus Shav in Canada

THE CANADIAN STRATFORD SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL, founded in 1953, is the leading classical repertory in North America. With three theatres and 760 employees, including ten directors, fourteen designers, and 99 salaried actors, it has a size and stability that none of our theatres can match, even though it performs only six months of the year, in a small town where the audience necessarily is made up mostly of tourists. A former student of mine joined the company as an actor upon graduating from university fourteen years ago, and has stayed on ever since, performing everything from walk-ons to leads, in the meantime marrying, buying a house, and starting a family; it is a pattern that is common there (though the actors have a standing joke that once you buy a house in Stratford, "they don't ask you back"), but practically unknown in the United States, where an actor can earn a fortune, but not a living.

Canada as a country is in many ways indistinguishable from the U.S. If you were parachuted into a typical Canadian city, it would be some time before you realized you were in a foreign country; the buildings, the products in the stores, the cars people drive, the clothes they wear, the advertisements and street signs, look all too familiar, and, assuming you are in one of the English-speaking provinces, the speech sounds American. Nevertheless, there are notable differences, which are reflected in the country's theatre. The Canadian acting style, which is most pronounced at Stratford, is very unlike ours. Understated, with an emphasis on clarity, precision, and a respect for text, Canadian acting seems almost French. This has nothing to do with an influence of French Canada on the English—the two cultures have little to do with each other there—but rather with the Canadian character, which combines a strong work ethic with an innate conservatism and diffidence. Less individualistic than Americans, Canadians are the ones who did *not* rebel against the British, and they tend not to rebel against theatrical tradition either. Thus, Canadian acting conservatories are highly selective and rigorous, stressing craft rather than personality or emotional self-indulgence. The typical Canadian actor is vastly better than his American counterpart, particularly in classical plays, but is less likely to become a star. Even if he does, he will be a star *actor*, like Hume Cronyn or Christopher Plummer, rather than a celebrity.

The Artistic Director of the Stratford Festival in its early years was the British-born Tyrone Guthrie, one of the great classical stage

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directors of our century. Guthrie was a proponent of offbeat staging of Shakespeare; Hamlet in a tuxedo, and Cressida in a bikini, were a few of his memorable costuming notions. Unlike later directors, however, he did not change the play to make a simplistic contemporary statement; nor did he condescend to the audience, with Shakespeare Made Simple in order to lure the average television viewer from his set. Above all, he did not change the text itself, which is now irritatingly common. On the contrary, he had a great love of Shakespeare, and a great respect for the poetry. He wanted his staging innovations to shed new light on the play, rather than to update it, simplify it, explain it away, or (honest injun, I heard a famous American director say this) "deconstruct" it. His early directing was in Britain, where the average theatregoer would see dozens of Shakespeare productions done traditionally; his fanciful productions, set against them, seemed fresh and insightful. In Canada, where the audience was less experienced, his productions were more conservative.

Of the eight productions I saw at the Festival last summer, the best two were in the Guthrie tradition. *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Twelfth Night* were set and costumed out of period (almost at random, I thought, in the case of the latter), but beautifully spoken and superbly acted, with the text a constant source of inspiration rather than an embarrassment.

Shrew, directed by Richard Monette, was set in *La Dolce Vita* Italy of the 1950s; Tranio and Lucentio roared into Padua in a sports car, Petruchio drove a Vespa motor scooter, Lucentio played Licio as a bop jazz musician complete with beret and sunglasses. The trouble with such updatings of Shakespeare is that the initial concept, which may look exciting in some fashionable theatre magazine, usually collapses in actual performance because of a multitude of dissonant details. Orson Welles's famous modern-dress *Julius Caesar*, with allusions to contemporary Nazi Germany, is still lovingly described in theatre history texts today, but what did its audiences make of the swords, the tapers, the prophecies, Caesar's ghost, the offhand references to everything from chariots to humours, and, most important, the underlying antidemocratic, "Chain of Being" world order?

Monette's production never had that kind of problem. First of all, he staged the opening Christopher Sly scenes (in much abbreviated form) to make it seem that what we were seeing was Sly's dream rather than the real world; confusion and inconsistencies were therefore not only justified but part of the fun. Second, Monette combined an inexhaustible comic inventiveness with a meticulous eye for textual detail. In one example out of many, during Kate's and Petruchio's initial flyting scene, Kate took off her shoe and flung it at Petruchio, so that when he said "Why does the world report that Kate doth limp?" she was actually hobbling about on the other, high-heeled shoe. Nearly every scene involved such an imaginative use of props;

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Bianca carried a teddy bear, which is certainly appropriate to her immature character, which Kate tore limb from limb accompanied by Bianca's girlish shrieks. A cuckoo clock, the sports car, the motor scooter (which turned into a hobby horse), a bass violin, and a martini glass, were just a few of the other modern objects that were put to good use. I never felt that they were simply being added to the text, but were instead amplifying values found there.

The modernized costuming, designed along with the settings by Debra Hanson, actually solved a staging problem that the play presents today: Tranio and Lucentio have a ploy to help win Bianca by exchanging clothes, and thus exchanging their roles as master and servant. A modern audience is unlikely to note any social distinction between them if they are dressed in Renaissance clothing, but with Lucentio in a blazer, and Tranio in a chauffeur's cap and uniform, the difference was obvious at once. Similarly, Kate's modern, white wedding gown, which gets dragged through the mud, had more emotional impact than a wedding dress from the Italian Renaissance could have had. Because my conservative tastes with regard to staging the classics have become notorious, I am sometimes asked whether I object to updatings in principle. My answer is that the time frame per se is a matter of indifference; for any given play, some periods will potentially be more effective than others, but whether it uses the original period, modern times, or some other era, the initial choice is not nearly as important as its ultimate execution in performance. Here, that execution was deft and insightful, though another director and designer could easily have started with the same concept and botched it.

Shrew had a talented and significantly large cast, reflecting the ability of a company like this to put forty or more actors on stage, and still have delightful performances in the smaller parts, like Scott Wentworth's blasé Tranio, Brian Tree's fussy Gremio, and William Needles' hilarious, stammering Pedant of Mantua. Goldie Semple and Colm Feore were a strong Kate and Petruchio, who worked well together. There was sexual electricity between them in the way they looked, touched, and spoke; I particularly liked the silent "Some Enchanted Evening" moment they made of their initial meeting. They performed Kate's final "submission" speech indifferently, however; Semple read it in a straightforward, unashamed fashion, but did not perform the implied business on "And place your hands below your husband's foot." Vanessa Redgrave did this in the London production two years ago; Timothy Dalton, playing her husband, then took her hands and drew her up to him, showing his acceptance of mutual obligation in marriage rather than simple female subjugation. The London production of the play was ultimately better because of its superior handling of the serious aspects of the play, but the Canadian version was funnier. In fact, it was the funniest Shakespeare I have ever seen.

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Robin Phillips' production of *Twelfth Night* was set in England in the eighteenth century, a choice that led to, among other oddities, a Feste who was not dressed in motley, since court jesters had gone out of fashion by then. To give him differentiation from the rest of the characters, Phillips had Albert Schultz play the role as a twisted spastic, which turned him into a sympathetic rather than a comic figure. Similarly, John Ormerod played Sir Andrew Aguecheek as a Scot, complete with kilt, and Peter Donaldson, an otherwise brilliant young character actor, played Malvolio as Japanese! Yet, after all, *Twelfth Night* is set in "Illyria," a never-never land of fantasy, like the seacoast of Bohemia in *The Winter's Tale*, where a weird melange of characters is appropriate.

Phillips was artistic director at Stratford from 1975 to 1980. He is now directing The Young Company, made up mostly of younger actors as the name implies, and performing at The Third Stage, a converted gymnasium about a mile from the main Festival Theatre. An enemy of what he has called "the Stratford shout," Phillips' productions are extremely subdued; one senses that he is constantly reigning the actors in, so that even outrageous characters like Sir Toby Belch speak in a muted, conversational tone. Phillips maintains a brisk pace, however, and has a good visual imagination. The stage of the theatre is an extremely deep thrust (necessitated by the shape of the gym), which he articulated with careful groupings like deep focus scenes in film; since *Twelfth Night* has a number of situations where characters recognize one another at a distance, or overhear one another (like Malvolio's scene with the letter), this worked very well.

The actors in The Young Company were an unending delight. *Twelfth Night* is Shakespeare's young persons' play; in fact, the absence of older authority figures—even Duke Orsino is described as young—has something to do with the extravagant behavior in Illyria. Peter Donaldson, as mentioned, was an excellent Malvolio, finding endless variations within the basic character. Like Feste, he became a sympathetic figure—his deceivers (who certainly go overboard in their abuse of him in any event) seemed like racists—but at the same time, Donaldson showed Malvolio clearly at fault too. His lurid fantasies in the letter scene were vivid and telling; Donaldson played the scene with endless emotional shadings, as he tried desperately not to give in to his own yearnings, but finally succumbed. Susan Coyne was a charming Olivia, Melanie Miller a delightful Maria (though incorrectly costumed as a servant girl, a common error), and Nancy Palk an outstanding Viola. Palk was the best I have ever seen at playing a Shakespearean heroine who must dress as a man. She managed to seem authentically masculine as Cesario, without any phony swagger or macho attitudes, yet feminine and beautiful as Viola. Only Shakespeare's boy actor, who had the added problem of seeming like a woman in the first place, could have impressed me more.

Elis Y. Lam's set simply used a bare, white pine wall at the back of

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the stage, punctuated by two small trees, plus a low platform on the thrust; the austere, woody look was reminiscent of the Japanese Noh theatre, which may have had something to do with Malvolio's offbeat characterization. The spare ivory and black furniture matched the soft colors in Abram Waterhouse's lovely costumes (Sir Toby's long, rust-colored vest was the only deviation from black, brown, or shades of off-white), which were contrasted by Louise Guinand's harsh, white lighting. All the strange, heterogeneous design choices, like the discordant characterizations and oddly quiet speech, worked well for this bittersweet comedy; what was lost in humor was regained in the somber atmosphere and sense of the bizarre, which are certainly there in the text if you look for them.

Phillips' production of *King Lear*, on the same stage with largely the same cast, plus William Hutt as Lear, was a flop. The elegant Edwardian costumes worked all right in the brittle opening scene, but provided no suitable equivalent for the raw, raging, outdoor scenes that follow. Some of the other costuming choices, like dressing the Fool (somberly played by John Ormerod) as a French curate, seemed outright perverse, as did the subdued acting style, which was totally inappropriate for this most operatic of tragedies. You just can't say lines like "Now, gods, stand up for bastards!" or "How sharper than a serpent's tooth," etc., as if asking someone to pass you the butter. Underplaying can be just as artificial as overplaying if it is inappropriate to the characters and situations; a little of the "Stratford shout" was desperately needed here!

The remaining plays at Stratford ranged from adequate to mediocre. At the Avon Theatre, a proscenium house downtown, Robert Beard's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, darker and more pensive than Stuart Vaughan's delightful production in Central Park in New York the previous summer, was performed in a precise but lively manner. A huge book upstage, which opened to form backdrops for the various locales, gave the production a nice fairy-tale quality. Also at the Avon, Peter Moss directed an indifferent cast in a production of *All's Well that Ends Well*, set in the American Civil War, a stupid idea, while David William directed T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, in honor of Eliot's centenary. Stephen Russell was a fine, bluff First Knight, but Nicholas Pennell, ordinarily an outstanding actor, was disappointing as Becket, a saint who is supposed to have started as a rake, but played here as a religious cliché. The Chorus of Women of Canterbury were just as awkward as they have always seemed whenever I have read or seen the play; maybe someday a director will find a way of making them work, but I doubt it.

The main, Festival Theatre at Stratford was designed by Guthrie and Tania Moiseiwitsch. Guthrie was an early proponent of open staging, and the Festival Theatre was his spectacular success. Although it is huge—with 2,258 seats spreading 220 degrees around its thrust stage, it is among the largest theatres in the world for dramatic

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presentations—it has a wonderfully intimate feeling. No seat is more than 65 feet from the stage, and the acoustics are excellent. At the Festival, I saw the *Shrew* already mentioned, certainly the high point of the season. A production of *My Fair Lady*, directed by the late Jean Gascon and starring John Neville (Artistic Director of the Stratford Festival, but not directing any individual plays last summer), was lifeless, however. It merely convinced me that a thrust stage is not suitable for musicals, and also that Canadians, like the British, just can't do American musical comedy, even when it is based on a British play.

Richard III, directed at the Festival Theatre by Brian Rintoul, was equally tepid. Colm Feore (Petruchio in *Shrew*) played Richard with an odd twist in his legs and practically no hump. The result was not only medically preposterous, as an orthopedic surgeon in the audience loudly told his companions in the lobby at intermission, it also meant that Richard's deformity was unnoticeable when he was not moving, so that most of the time he seemed perfectly well. Perhaps influenced by that society that is trying to restore the good name of the historical Richard III, the rest of Feore's performance was equally mild-mannered. Since he was supposed to be playing *Shakespeare's* Richard III, however, the result was like portraying the Elephant Man with a mild case of acne or Helen Keller in *The Miracle Worker* as a little myopic.

The Shaw Festival is about a hundred miles from Stratford at Niagara-on-the-Lake, on Lake Ontario at the mouth of the Niagara River. Niagara-on-the-Lake is a restored nineteenth-century town with a sanitized, Disney look to it, and prices to match. (Those traveling by car might consider staying in St. Catharines, only twenty minutes away.) The Festival is smaller than the Stratford operation, but still large by American standards, with three theatres and plenty of fine Canadian actors. Shaw was not as great a playwright as Shakespeare, of course, however much he may have wanted to be, but the Festival is devoted to producing not only Shaw's works but also those of his contemporaries. Since Shaw lived for 94 years, these include playwrights from Scribe to Beckett, with a lot of great ones in between.

Shaw's *You Never Can Tell*, presented at the beautiful Festival Theatre, is a little-known gem of a play, one of his best. There was a superb production of it a few years ago in New York at the uptown Circle in the Square, but the Canadian version was disappointingly shallow. Performances were fast and glib, with key lines going unpointed; more than once I heard audience members ask one another what an actor had just said. Director Christopher Newton (who is also Artistic Director of the Festival) is too enamored of dead center stage, which makes for centripetal, unvaried blocking. In particular, he put the dining table at center for the luncheon scene in Act II, which made for endless long crosses by the waiters, who

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seemed to be unprofessionally rushing. Throughout, Douglas Rain as the fatherly Walter Boon was not nearly as good as Philip Bosco had been in New York; Rain seemed a monotonous dotard who could never have been kept on in any capacity at a smart Victorian seaside hotel, much less been headwaiter. Mary Haney was miscast as the supposedly fascinating young Gloria Clandon; rather pale and plain, she actually looked older than Barbara Gordon, who was playing her mother.

Newton also directed *Geneva*, at the little Court House theatre. This is *not* one of Shaw's best plays. Written in 1938 when he was eighty-two, it is a political cartoon of the dictators—Mussolini, Franco, and Hitler, but not Stalin—who were then swaggering on the world's stage. Shaw had at times been infatuated with these figures, but the play certainly does not glorify them. On the other hand, it does not create convincing portraits of them either, nor grapple with their evil. There are flashes of Shavian wit, and moments of insight into the ambiguities of governance, plus a lot of tedium. Perhaps it is just not possible to portray the dictators dramatically; both Bertolt Brecht and Charlie Chaplin, no mean artists, also failed with their versions of Hitler.

The actors, amusingly costumed by Diz Marsh with just the right degree of exaggeration, at least looked good. Michael Ball was strong as "Bombardone," with the Mussolini pose and strut; Ian D. Clark was equally vivid as "Flanco"; while Al Kozlik came off oddly like a Jewish comic as "Battler," which was, again, probably more the result of the writing than anything else. All had rather all-purpose accents, but since parody rather than realism was the aim, they did not bother me. The best performance of all was by Herb Foster as the British diplomat, who established the character vividly, then underplayed it, yet raged from time to time when necessary.

The best production I saw at the Shaw Festival was Harley Granville-Barker's *The Voysey Inheritance*, consummately directed at the Court House by Neil Munro. Granville-Barker was an important theatre figure long associated with Shaw both as an actor and a director; his own plays show a Shavian influence, but are more crafty and less witty, which in some instances is a blessing. *Voysey* is a well-made, turn-of-the-century problem play that still seems fresh today. Its problem—the venality of lawyers—has not only not dated, it is timeless.

A young solicitor, working for his father, Mr. Voysey, in the old and respected family firm, discovers that the father has been raiding clients' trust funds to finance his own investments, and thus maintain the family in the elegant style they have taken for granted. This has been going on at least since the day, thirty years earlier, when Mr. Voysey learned that *his* father was swindling clients! The irony is that the system can go on forever as long as clients remain confident in the firm, keeping their funds in its care. The Voysey Inheritance consists

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of fraud plus this "confidence trick." Upon the death of Mr. Voysey, the son, Edward, takes over the firm and attempts quietly to restore clients' accounts, but this proves impossible; the young man just doesn't generate the same "confidence" that the wily old father did. Honesty doesn't pay. There is also a subplot about an estranged married couple who, ironically, can't afford to separate; and a "New Woman," who has always managed her *own* money, who becomes the love interest for Edward. The various social problems are gracefully handled, so that the play flows naturally and humorously, without seeming preachy. Granville-Barker had a good feel for the actual details of finance, giving his play a refreshing bluntness about money that, as Brecht once pointed out, is rare on the stage.

Douglas Rain was fine as Mr. Voysey; here, his avuncular blandness contrasted appropriately with the character's ruthless venality. Joe Ziegler was outstanding as his son, combining Edward's basic callowness and honesty with an overriding sense of wonder and irony. Cameron Porteous' period sets and costumes were deftly effective, while Louise Guinand's lighting managed to evoke the ambiance, on the small stage, of everything from the somber law office to a candlelit dinner to high noon in August.

The Stratford and Shaw Festivals are on the verge of achieving major world status. It is in the Canadian character, however, to remain on the verge of excellence without ever getting there. As the Canadian writer Morley Callaghan once said, "People in this country shy away from excellence. They say, aw gee, no—and they go for the second-rate thing, all the time." These theatre companies are performing some of the greatest playwrights in history, with outstanding actors, fine designers, and hefty budgets, yet their percentage of success is well below that of their major European counterparts. The difference comes down to the directors, who are far too often unimaginative, or eccentric, or even lacking in basic directorial skills. The time for another Tyrone Guthrie is long overdue.

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MARCIA B. SIEGEL

Changing the Guards

THE NEW YORK CITY BALLET'S AMERICAN MUSIC FESTIVAL was Peter Martins' first independent move since the death of George Balanchine, and it pushed the company out of a five-year holding pattern. In this extended period of mourning, Martins and co-balletmaster Jerome Robbins acted as willing caretakers of the Balanchine tradition. They preserved the Balanchine repertory, even reviving some ballets that had been out of circulation, and Martins created ballets in a Balanchinian classical style to complement Robbins' more free-ranging forms. It didn't do any harm, either, to use Balanchine as a feature attraction while paying respect to his memory.

With the company's position stronger than ever, Balanchine's reputation solidified to a degree he never reached in life. Accolades, books, tributes poured out. Disciples and detractors said openly what they hadn't dared to say in his presence. Come-lately critics jumped on the bandwagon. Now they could praise him without risk, since his work—now an oeuvre—was already figured out, defanged, and fully certified as a great thing. The bereft fans clung ever more tightly to his legacy, knowing there wouldn't be any more. And the dancers were philosophically and physically bred to carry on his style. An institution fifty years in the making, a phenomenon in the feckless world of dance, the New York City Ballet would always be a Balanchine company, a Balanchine shrine. Or so we thought.

The safety of the ballet repertory is always in doubt. Ballet changes all the time, a step here, a notch of tempo there, a smoothed-out accent, a shade of emphasis. These never get noticed in the day-to-day performance of repertory, but if they're not corrected, they accumulate until the work is transformed. Ballet needs constant shoring up. It needs the prod of personal imperative, the systematic scrutiny of an eye that knows what to look for and sees what *wants* changing. More than anything else I think, it's the power of personal vigor and vision that creates style in dance. We the audience aren't sharp enough to see when style slips, only to notice when the cracks have gotten so wide they drastically change the look of a passage or a whole work. Despite the scrupulous efforts of his designated heirs and coaches, Balanchine's ballets have begun to deteriorate. Some people love the relaxed, slurred style and the friendlier delivery of the younger dancers, and they don't miss the lost details. Some people think the whole enterprise is getting flabby.

What NYCB is facing now—and Martins must be praised for

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recognizing it so publicly with his festival—is an identity crisis the magnitude of which no ballet company in modern times has experienced. Precisely because NYCB is the project of a single, evolving creative persona, its post-Balanchine leadership, no matter how dynamic, must either seek new directions or be content as curators. Unlike other companies which lacked a prolific, propulsive force to shape them, NYCB never had to hustle for choreographic drawing cards; it had the biggest. Not only didn't it have to search for talent, it never had to consider what would attract an audience. As Balanchine recedes into the company of the Old Masters, the New York City Ballet is having to think about what ballet is supposed to be in the 1980s and '90s. The American Music Festival put this process on display.

At first announcement, the festival seemed to be another sign that things were still status quo. Institutions need periodic events to break the regular seasons, and the NYCB staged festivals with flair under Balanchine. Perhaps 1988's participating choreographers, five imported and thirteen from the NYCB stable, would come up with one or two wonderful works that could justify the vast expenditures of money and effort these occasions always require. But the results were disappointing. For me, there were no premieres that felt truly memorable, many that were inferior or trivial. In fact, the pleasantest parts of the 1988 festival were the Balanchine works interpolated among the new material. And thinking back over the NYCB's record of splashy events that yielded only one or two good ballets, I have to recognize that nearly all the rewards were provided by Balanchine then too.

As the festival progressed, I began to feel I was watching a momentous event, an elaborate and secret rite of passage. The elements of a longer and less perceptible process were revealed in symbolic form—changes were hinted at and sometimes declared in fiery, disappearing letters. Balanchine's direct influence was evident in many works by present and former NYCB dancers, but aspects of the Balanchine style that have been eroding over the past five years were also acknowledged, even built on by new choreographers. Ideas that Balanchine never considered despite his modernity made full, confident appearances. The dancers looked convinced too, not just contented. They seemed to believe they might still be the carriers of innovation, and to welcome being given permission to revert to the state of naturalism and flamboyance adopted by most other contemporary dancers. By the end of the three weeks, I felt some kind of transition had been negotiated, unintended perhaps by those who engendered it, and that the future of the company was now quite undefined.

I think the key aesthetic issue of the festival, and of this whole year in ballet, was just what constitutes contemporary work, and how some dance form might be devised in which classical rigor and integrity don't drain away in eclectic compromises.

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Balanchine proved a master at solving this problem. For the first thirty years in America he successfully blended classicism and modernity. After that his contemporary sense may have slipped a bit, but by then he had his audience well in hand. Philosophically, he never uprooted himself from Europe, and his unwavering adherence to the high-art European traditions brought him his initial gloss and prestige. He offered a dance form that was elitist in origin even when it wasn't so elevated in tone, a form the culture-climbers were—and still are—more willing to pay for than a humble homegrown product. Throughout his career, his ballets to American music were overtly aimed at popularizing the classical idiom, often through the use of Hollywood images, but his most startling and difficult works were those in which he grafted American rhythms and dynamism onto the music of the European moderns, Stravinsky especially, rather than American scores. Making little attempt to glamourize or humanize the look of the dancers, he disguised the American qualities by merging them totally into classicism.

I suspect Balanchine had an aristocrat's affectionate disdain for American culture—at least, he couldn't take it quite seriously. *Ivesiana* (newly revived for the festival), *Stars and Stripes*, *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*, *Tarantella*, *Who Cares?* and *Western Symphony* apparently represent all the retrievable ballets Balanchine set to American music, and they're probably the most impressive of what is anyhow a very small assortment. Excepting *Tarantella*, which simply fits a traditional pas de deux into the traditional Italianate tunes of Gottschalk, and *Slaughter*, lifted from the 1936 Broadway show *On Your Toes*, these works take bits of Americana as little more than a pretext for classical ballets. They're like picture postcards: bowlegged cowboys and buxom dance hall girls, the flag-waving cheerleader and the cocky, too-short drum major, the gangland rubout and the hoofer with the heart of gold, the winking lights of the skyline and the clinch at the final curtain. These are hardly Balanchine's most profound or searching images, and collectively they reveal him as an outsider, a tourist, seeing the stereotypes and not so much making fun of them as finding fun in them.

Even *Ivesiana* enters gingerly into its music, takes a few searing glances at people who fail to make contact, and then withdraws from them, as if to peek at them any longer would invite trouble. The fragmentation and dissonance of Ives, his rhythmic unpredictability and his general thorniness, perhaps his most distinctive and American qualities, seem disconcerting to Balanchine, who responds to them with formalism or stasis. Though not necessarily better ballets, the four other Ives works in the festival were all unusual and less formal than *Ivesiana*, and were less extreme in their reaction to the music.

Peter Martins' *Calcium Light Night*, his first ballet, is offhand, grimly playful, sparing of its material. Jerome Robbins' *Ives, Songs*, his most recent work though not a festival premiere, indulges the sentimental, patriotic side of Ives, and perhaps of Robbins too, a ballet of

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childhood and family, of transcendental faith and chauvinistic courage. And Eliot Feld's *The Unanswered Question* contains almost no dancing and turns Ives's cryptic discontinuity into full-fledged Dadaism, with weird machines and inventions and apparitions, all suggesting the curio-cabinet world of Ives's youth in the late nineteenth century. Paul Taylor's *Danbury Mix* featuring his own modern dance company, with NYCB soloist Peter Frame, made the clearest stylistic rapprochement with Ives, although it didn't even nod in the direction of classicism, except to suggest that waywardness and individualism can only submit just so long to regimentation before reasserting themselves.

The inclusion of Taylor as one of the guest choreographers in the festival tested the NYCB's longstanding aloofness from modern dance. The instances when the company used a modern dance choreographer are so few as to constitute special occasions in themselves. And though Martins invited Laura Dean as well as Taylor, together with the fusion choreographers Lar Lubovitch and William Forsythe, his attitude toward the maverick American form is still ambivalent, as evidenced by his own *Barber Violin Concerto.* In this didactic item, one of seven new works (nine if you count the trivia) Martins made for the festival, ballet dancers and modern dancers are shown as polar opposites, never to be reconciled except to their mutual detriment.

In the light of the festival's heaviest portents, I took *Barber Violin Concerto* as simply a polemic, with jocular overtones. Martins doesn't really expect to defend the bastion of classicism against a modern invasion. In fact, he seems to see fusion forms as the logical direction for the company style. Fusion dance borrows indiscriminately among vocabularies and tries to upgrade each of them with the most fetching aspects of the others. It doesn't give priority to any one discipline. The biggest drawback of fusion dance, I think, is this refusal to commit to any one point of view. As an aesthetic, fusion admits the choreographer's reluctance either to invent his own idiom or to penetrate deeply into an existing one. In its penchant for timeliness and spectacle, it admits that serving the audience is its primary motive. This might be a worthy democratic ideal except that its audience, in this country at least, is bourgeois and undiscriminating. Perhaps Peter Martins sees this escape into the present—jazzing up, smoothing out, or shaking apart the classical idiom with notions explored by modern dancers—as preferable to a sequestered life pursuing the Balanchinian ideal.

Since *Calcium*, Martins has made many classical ballets, but his modern ballets have been swinging away from pointework, away from line and musicality, and toward a narrative sexuality that opposes the sublimated sexual content of classicism. His festival work *Tanzspiel* uses a classical vocabulary in conjunction with modern gestures and shapes to elaborate on and eventually transmute the first movement of *Ivesiana*. That is, while *Ivesiana* remains a formal enigma, *Tanzspiel*

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illustrates a contemporary news story. One ballet is an urban fear-fantasy; the other insists the fantasy is real. In both works, a woman and a man make their way through a crowd, searching for something but unaware of each other. Almost by accident, they meet, connect, part, meet again in a scene of cruelty. Then one of them leaves and the other continues as before. People spoke about *Tanzspiel* as if it were "about" the murder of Jennifer Levin, whose prepschool strangler had just been tried in New York. They didn't even notice it was a meltdown of *Ivesiana*, which, by the way, was tepidly received.

The audience's favorite ballet of the festival, *Behind the china dogs*, was by William Forsythe, the hottest young choreographer around. Forsythe has been the *New York Times*' white knight for the past couple of years, and before the spring season was out, it hailed his Frankfurt Ballet as "A dance company for a young audience." Forsythe was a shrewd choice for NYCB in its urgent quest for that audience. *china dogs* turned out to be far less splashy than Forsythe's usual fare—it had no existentialist voice-overs, no stage devices to trap the dancers, and only a moderate degree of misogyny—but it was racy for the New York State Theater. Forsythe uses pointework skills, especially turning and balance, in equal parts with eroticism and alienation. Sequence, speed and energy are compressed tightly while the body is stretched, skewed, twisted, and further distorted by expressionistic lighting effects. All his ballets seem to project dancers as moving, modernistic objects in a series of decorative situations that make ironic reference to things the audience recognizes and often respects. Many choreographers have given ballet dancers unballetic things to do, but when Forsythe dresses New York City Ballet dancers as punks and has the men throw Balanchine's divine women around, the audience gets a malicious thrill.

Peter Martins has been an apt pupil of this attitude, and at least three more of his ballets in the festival exploited it: *Black & White*, *The Waltz Project*, and *Ecstatic Orange*. His muse, Heather Watts, seems to have no tensile limits, and her frequent partner Jock Soto is just uncouth enough not to mind roughing her up. There seems to be a whole cadre of NYCB dancers adapting to these new choreographic demands, while another group is featured in the classical repertory. This division is not yet clearcut or absolute, but one has to note that Kyra Nichols, Darci Kistler, Ib Andersen, Merrill Ashley, Stephanie Saland and Judith Fugate were rather pointedly underused by the "modern" choreographers in the festival, while the Watts/Soto wing dominated nearly every program.

The two ballets that I thought showed the best potential for bringing classical virtuosity and aestheticism into a contemporary mode received very little attention. Bart Cook's *Into the Hopper* didn't come off, mostly, I think, because the under-rehearsed dancers couldn't maneuver their way through a lavish production. Cook's idea of having modern paintings come to life and act out a detective story based on the legend of Orpheus was witty and ingenious, a collage of

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postmodern ironies and techniques. As more modest, downtown deconstructions during the season demonstrated, there's a lot to be explored in this genre, and a company with NYCB's resources can push it to the limit. However, the management seems to have written off Cook's experiment; it's not one of the nine festival creations scheduled for the fall season.

Laura Dean's *Space* is, however. Dean has been stalled lately in her own minimalist formulas, but in *Space* she gained some new perspectives. It's paradoxical that minimalism's best chance for development lies in getting bigger, but that's been the case with most of its avatars: Philip Glass, Steve Reich, Lucinda Childs, Frank Stella. The State Theater's expansive stage and the disciplined enthusiasm of forty NYCB dancers spurred Dean into new ramifications of her striding, spinning dance designs. The clean, spare precision of Dean's style is not alien to classical dancers—Jerome Robbins tried it successfully a couple of years ago with *Glass Pieces*—and Dean has incorporated more ballet steps, leaps, and arm gestures than ever into her work. After so much writhing and anguishing in the rest of the festival, it was a pleasure to see a dance that had unusual floor patterns—crisscrossings, squarings-off, lines merging, splitting, cohering into diagonals, the stage filling with people, then thinning out. At its best Dean's work can be visually and spiritually satisfying, and *Space* is one of her best.

To my mind *Space* extends both the dancers' and the audience's range as nothing has done since the Jerome Robbins/Twyla Tharp collaboration *Brahms/Handel* five years ago. Interestingly, *Brahms/Handel* was dropped from the spring schedule due to that old villain "illness and injuries," and Tharp has still to make a ballet of her own for NYCB. To add to the irony, it looks as if she never will. As the spring season gave way to the hottest, most dreary European-imported ballet season in years, American Ballet Theater, NYCB's main rival for the past quarter-century, announced that Tharp would become a resident choreographer and artistic associate. While the American Music Festival was on, Ballet Theater was quietly holding its best season in years across Lincoln Center Plaza at the Met, with a good-looking corps of dancers and an improving repertory that included large dollops of well-executed Balanchine. With Tharp on board and a new School of Classical Ballet launched over the summer, Ballet Theater could make a serious incursion into NYCB's turf. Add to that the Millicent Hodson reconstruction of Balanchine's long-lost and lamented *Cotillon* this fall by the Joffrey Ballet, which has lost its founder-leader in the past year and will consequently also be seeking new directions. Looks like we'll have an interesting 1988-89 season, figuring out where's the best place to pick up the threads of new and old ballet.

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BERT CARDULLO

Epiphanies

THE BEST FILM I HAVE SEEN RECENTLY is simple but subtle, aggressive but winning: *The Mass Is Ended,* the third feature by the Italian director Nanni Moretti (born 1953) and the first to be released in this country. *The Mass Is Ended* was made in 1985; it took three years to get here and has already left after receiving a lukewarm to negative response from the New York press, which never knows quite what to do with new works from unheralded directors. If Moretti catches on in Paris, though, you can be sure that the New York press will tout him as a director of the first rank whose films it is *de rigueur* to see. I'll not wait for the French to discover him, thank you.

The Mass Is Ended is a comedy-drama in which Moretti himself plays a priest in a modern-day, citified Italy not as smitten with priests and the Catholic Church as it once was—if it ever was! (Moretti has played the lead in all three of his films, in addition to directing them and writing or co-writing their scripts.) He's known as Giulio in the film, and our first glimpse of him, in the opening shots, is in ordinary clothing, not in his habit. In this sequence he walks alone, fishes alone, then swims alone in a long shot that emphasizes his solitariness. We don't discover that he's a priest until, in the next sequence, we watch him perform a marriage. Moretti the director has thus established from the first—and established *visually,* not through language—that this will be the story of a man who is also a priest, not of a priest whose character as a man is more or less beside the point. Right after marrying the couple, Giulio leaves his island parish with them for Rome, his hometown, where they will honeymoon and where he will take over a small church on the outskirts of the city—a church that has fallen on hard times after losing its former priest to marriage and, insult to injury, to a home right across the street.

The first shot in Rome is of Giulio's back as he sits on a wall overlooking the city, and it sets the tone for what follows (we will get several more shots of his back during the film): his growing frustration in an urban world over which he in particular and the Church in general have less and less influence. To be sure, *The Mass Is Ended* is a comic as well as a serious look at Giulio's frustration, and one excellent example of both strains occurs on his first day at his new church. He is napping on a cot in his stark quarters when a soccer ball comes flying through the window. Giulio sullenly picks it up and walks out the door to find a courtyard full of boys. He moves toward them and they back off—all of this in nearly choreographed movement. Then he kicks the ball into their midst and joins in the game. Soon,

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however, he trips, hits the asphalt, and doesn't get up; the boys, whom one would expect to rush to his aid, completely ignore him and continue playing. Moretti has given us a small comic ballet in this scene, but he has also told us that Giulio's priestly authority is largely symbolic and very vulnerable to the hazards—the heedlessness—of modern existence. To emphasize his point cinematically, he includes a number of overhead or high-angle shots, of Giulio on his cot and of Giulio playing soccer, which make the character appear smaller and weighed down.

Giulio's sphere of declining influence begins, or perhaps it would be better to say ends, with his family. He is happy to be able to see his parents and sister again regularly, but he is angrily unhappy at what he learns: that Valentina, his sister, is pregnant by her nonentity of a boyfriend, Simone, and is determined to have an abortion; and that his father is about to leave his mother and move in with a woman named Arianna, whom he has been seeing for a year and who is young enough to be his daughter. Is Giulio able to change the minds of his father and sister, like a good priest? Absolutely not. Not only does he not change their minds, but he reacts to their willfulness with willfulness of his own and even with violence. He tells Valentina that he'll kill her first and then himself if she has an abortion; he roughs up her boyfriend in an attempt to convince him that he should try to talk Valentina out of aborting her child; and Giulio bodily throws his father out of church for declaring both that he wants to have a child by Arianna and that he wants his son to hear his confession—in other words, that he wants to continue sinning at the same time that he is absolved of his sins. (When I was a boy, my non-Catholic friends thought that this was the greatest, and the most damning, part of being Catholic.) Such a zealot is this priest that he can tearfully tell his dead mother how much he loves her at the same time that he says he'll never forgive her for having committed the mortal sin of suicide.

Giulio has very little to do in the film with his parishioners, not only because he doesn't have many (he celebrates his first mass before a totally empty house!) but also because, as I suggested earlier, Moretti is interested less in the sacrament of the priesthood, in the priest as servant of/example to his congregation, than in the character of a man attempting to join his role as priest with his roles as son, brother, and friend.[1] Giulio would be a priest in the world as well as in the church, and what he learns in the course of the film is that modern, urban Italians, and perhaps modern, urban Catholics in general, would rather keep their religion separate from their lives, would rather turn

[1] Compare Moretti's seriocomic treatment of a priest attempting in this way to bring the Church to the world with Robert Bresson's somber *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951), in which a curate attempts to bring the world to the Church. Bresson *is* interested in the sacrament of the priesthood, and his film is about the martyrdom of a priest both to his own unmitigated piety and to his parishioners' befuddlement in the face of his exhortations that they imitate it.

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to religion as a last recourse from life than as a first resource in it, or would rather use religion simply as a means of marking life's stages: baptism in infancy, communion and confirmation in early adolescence, marriage as an adult, death in old age. Before he became a priest, Giulio had run a political newspaper with his friend André, who later became a terrorist; Giulio's goal, as his sister reveals, had been to improve the world. This is still his goal, except that now he believes that the first step to changing the world is awakening the spiritual lives of its inhabitants. (Who said that Marxism and Christianity couldn't be reconciled?) And the first spirits he attempts to rekindle are those of his family and friends, because he knows them best, cares most about them, and wants desperately to make a difference in their lives. But he fails with his family, and he fails with four of his friends from pre-priesthood days: André the once-imprisoned terrorist, who wants nothing to do with Giulio or his religion and who is resigned to the failure of his own, political mission; Saverio, whose unluckiness in love has turned him into a recluse for whom life has no meaning; Gianni, an unrepentant homosexual who is otherwise Giulio's closest friend; and Cesare, who converts to Catholicism as an escape from the trials of modern existence and who even wants to become a priest, but whose hyper-religiosity causes Giulio to deny him the opportunity.

At the end of the film, Giulio officiates at the wedding of Cesare and Antonella, at which are present his father (without Arianna), his sister (without Simone), his three additional friends (one of them, Saverio, *with* his ex-wife, Astrid), and stand-ins for himself as a little boy and his mother as a young woman. After Giulio declares, "The mass is ended. Go in peace," the bride and groom begin to dance and are joined by more couples. The last shot of Giulio shows him smiling beneficently upon his congregation. But this is a bittersweet comic reconciliation, a qualified "dance of life," for Giulio has declared his intention to leave his Roman parish for an isolated, windswept one in Tierra del Fuego, where he feels he will truly be needed and where he will be less a priest to the people than their friend. Giulio has given up trying to integrate religion into modern, urban existence, with all its distractions and temptations, and will once again become a priest on an island, where his office will be as much to mirror the natural simplicity of his parishioners' lives as to mediate between them and their God. Only the unadorned life, challenged by the elements, leaves room for the growth of the spirit and the recognition of God; anything else just gets in the way: this is what Giulio has come to believe.

Everything about *The Mass Is Ended* is good, from Nicola Piovani's music, which manages to be at once wistful and inspiriting, to Franco di Giacomo's cinematography, which uses the Italian sun as a warm backdrop for its color and not as a bleaching element in it. This is a gentle, embracing sun, not a harsh and piercing one. There is no

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harsh light in the film, just as there is no darkness: there is not a single night scene (we find characters sleeping or about to go to sleep, but always during the day). Moretti has chosen to play out what is for Giulio essentially a dark drama against the brightest and most serene—and therefore seemingly the most indifferent—of backgrounds. And he has played his own dark, brooding character to perfection, even when—especially when—that character is the object of comedy. This man who would be a priest in the world is forever running up against opposition to his mere existence as a human being, some of it physical or violent, as in the incident cited earlier that took place during the boys' soccer game, and as when he suffers a sort of murderous baptism in a public fountain at the hands of a Roman whom he has accused of stealing his parking place. Giulio doesn't plead for mercy here on the grounds that he is a priest, and his assailant does not once acknowledge him as one. This is wildly funny, because completely unexpected. It also rings terribly true, because Moretti plays it absolutely straight. He milks no laughs, he tries to elicit no pity: he simply remains his character's angry, searching, persistent human self, and he wants the self recognized before the collar. Giulio is inspired, not prideful, and his story is fantastic to the extent that he is probably the priest that many an ex-seminarian wishes he had become.

From this first film of Nanni Moretti's shown in the United States we turn to John Huston's last film, period: *The Dead*, based on the last short story in James Joyce's collection *Dubliners* and the last story Joyce ever wrote. Nearly all of Huston's films are based on novels, plays, or short stories, and James Agee was right to conjecture in 1950, when Huston was shooting *The Red Badge of Courage*, that the director "lacks that deepest kind of creative impulse and that intense self-critical skepticism without which the stature of a great artist is rarely achieved. A brilliant adapter, he has yet to do a Huston 'original,' barring the war documentaries."[2] Agee added that the better the original material, the better Huston functioned as an artist. This is because Huston was a faithful adapter, not a loose one. He didn't seek to put his own stamp on source material; he tried to be as faithful as possible to the original, to re-create the literature in filmic terms. The loose adapter *does* seek to put his own stamp on original material, to interpret it independently, and consequently he often works with lesser literary sources—sources, that is, that leave room for improvement, for expansion or refocusing. Huston stayed away from these, as the following sampling of his films will attest: the aforementioned *Red Badge of Courage* (1951), *Moby Dick* (1956), *The Bible* (1966), *Wise Blood* (1979), *Under the Volcano* (1984), and now *The Dead*.

[2] "Undirectable Director," in *Agee on Film* (New York, 1953). Originally published in *Life*, 18 September 1950. The war documentaries are: *Report from the Aleutians* (1943), *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945), and *Let There Be Light* (1946; did not receive its theatrical release until 1981).

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The problem for the faithful adapter, of course, is that sometimes filmic equivalents for the literary can't be found. If prose could easily be translated into film, then it would lose some of its distinctiveness as prose. The following example from Joyce's story makes my point:

> A light fringe of snow lay like a cape on the shoulders of his overcoat and like toecaps on the toes of his galoshes; and, as the buttons of his overcoat slipped with a squeaking noise through the snow-stiffened frieze, a cold fragrant air from out-of-doors escaped from crevices and folds.

Gabriel Conroy and his wife, Gretta, have just entered the Dublin home of Gabriel's two aunts, Kate and Julia Morkan, for their annual dinner party-dance on the Feast of the Epiphany. We get none of Joyce's effect here in the film in part because *we see Gabriel himself,* all of him, and he is what captures our attention; in the story the words quoted above create a picture, and Gabriel's physical distinctiveness is missing from that picture. Joyce's emphasis is on the snow, which plays an important role in the story and is introduced at this moment. Aside from the fact that cold, fragrant air escaping from crevices and folds can't be filmed, to have cut to the fringe of snow on the shoulders of Gabriel's overcoat and on the toes of his galoshes would have been to italicize that snow in a way that the prose does not do. Joyce's prose is a *description* that, in the course of the story, gains symbolic importance. Huston's cutting to the snow, had he done so, would have been to give it symbolic portent immediately, to direct us forcibly to its significance, and this would have been too much. With a choice between too much and too little, Huston wisely chooses too little: we see *Gabriel,* the shoulders of whose overcoat and the toes of whose galoshes are in fact covered, in turn, with a fringe of snow. But too little is not enough, and "enough" could only be contained in prose.

Huston faced another problem in filming Joyce's "The Dead" that was solvable but that he nonetheless did not solve. Joyce wrote in the third person—a non-participating narrator tells the story from the point of view of Gabriel's consciousness, as in the following:

> Gabriel felt humiliated . . . by the evocation of this figure from the dead, a boy in the gasworks. While he had been full of memories of their secret life together, full of tenderness and joy and desire, she had been comparing him in her mind with another. A shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. He saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarians and idealising his own clownish lusts, the pitiable fatuous fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror.

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Few fiction films employ a third-person narrator, and those that do don't employ much of one, because the more we hear him, the more we feel we might as well be reading the story or novel itself (third-person narration is most often found in documentaries). Third-person narration is usually translated into the more immediate interior monologue and we hear it in voice-over as we see the character; again, though, we can't hear too much of it or else our visual experience will be thwarted.

Now Joyce wrote "The Dead" in the third person for a reason, best described by Allen Tate:

> The author suppresses himself but does not allow the hero to tell his own story, for the reason that "psychic distance" is necessary to the end in view. This end is the *sudden* revelation to Gabriel of his egoistic relation to his wife and, through that revelation, of his inadequate response to his entire experience. Thus Joyce must establish his central intelligence through Gabriel's eyes, but a little above and outside him at the same time . . .[3]

Perhaps Huston thought that Joyce's "psychic distance" would be destroyed by translating third-person narration into the interior monologue of Gabriel Conroy, for we hear Gabriel speak in voice-over only toward the end of the film, after Gretta has fallen asleep in their hotel room. Huston was wrong, however, if he did think this, because film, through the very device of framing the action, is ideally suited to maintaining the "psychic distance" of third-person narration at the same time that it periodically translates the third-person narration of fiction into interior monologue on a film soundtrack. Huston keeps his camera back for the most part in *The Dead*, using it to frame the action objectively rather than to enter it subjectively, but he fatally damages his film by not allowing us, through voice-over, to enter Gabriel's consciousness at significant moments. We cannot know, from Huston's film and from the performance of Donal McCann—and we should *not* be presumed to know the story—that Gabriel regards his aunts as only two ignorant old women, that he considers his fellow party guests vulgarians, that he pities his wife the loss of her youthful beauty when she feels no such pity for herself. The *narrator* tells us these things in the story because we must know them if we are to appreciate both the size of Gabriel's ego and the extent of his "recognition" at the end, his movement outside himself into an expansiveness that includes "all the living and the dead," that includes the room in which he's staying as well as all of Ireland and even the universe, throughout which he imagines snow softly falling.

These criticisms made, I must say that *The Dead* is a delight to look at and to hear, in music and in the music of Irish accents. Alex North,

[3] "Three Commentaries: Poe, James, and Joyce," *The Sewanee Review*, Winter 1950.

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who did the score for Huston's *Under the Volcano* and is best known for the scores of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (on screen) and *Death of a Salesman* (on stage and on screen), has composed delicately and evocatively. North has captured in his music the double nature of Joyce's story as a lament for Gabriel and a hymn to him, to the gentle, moving epiphany he achieves at the end. Fred Murphy's cinematographic world is filled not so much with color as with light—lamplight or night light. Murphy's palette consists largely of browns, grays, and blacks, and it is his intimate lighting during the party scenes that makes these colors mingle and dance, and it is his cold lighting during Gabriel and Gretta's coach ride back to the hotel and in the hotel room itself that makes these colors congeal and recede, to be surrounded by the whiteness of snow's blanket.

I cannot be as positive about the performances of Donal McCann as Gabriel and Anjelica Huston as Gretta, but, as is often the case in film, this has less to do with the performances themselves than with the film of which they are a part. Gretta is too prominent at the dinner party and dance, as she is not in the story—Huston cuts back and forth a number of times between her and her husband when she is dancing and he is not, and when she, unlike him, is unsettled by the recitation of a poem called "Broken Vows" (translated from the Gaelic by Lady Gregory and not part of Joyce's story). Huston does this to try to convey possessiveness and insecurity on Gabriel's part, but in the process he diminishes the effect of Gabriel's reversal at the end. Joyce's point is that, up to the moments of reversal and recognition, Gabriel is completely wrapped up in himself and in his role as his aunts' favored guest. The result of Huston's distortion of the story is that his daughter injects into Gretta a preciosity or self-consciousness that isn't part of her character and a remoteness that shouldn't be part of her character until much later, when she hears the tenor Bartell D'Arcy (a guest at the party) sing "The Lass of Aughrim" and is reminded thereby of Michael Furey, a boy who had once been in love with her in Galway and who used to sing the same song. Michael died at seventeen and, Gretta later says to Gabriel, "I think he died for me."

Donal McCann is hindered, as I have pointed out, by the absence of his interior monologue on the soundtrack until the end of the film, and he simply doesn't have it in himself to tell us physically—facially and gesturally—what Joyce does in words. Add to this the fact that McCann's eyes aren't expressive, whereas Gabriel's are "delicate and restless," and that he's not helped by the omission of the character's "glimmering gilt-rimmed eyeglasses," and you have an actor hamstrung less by his own shortcomings than by his director's shortsightedness. Before his death, John Huston did his part in the unsuccessful campaign against the "colorizing" of black-and-white movies (wretched process). I wish that he had been as faithful to Joyce's "The Dead" as he wanted Ted Turner to be to his *Maltese Falcon*.

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CLARA CLAIBORNE PARK

Not Time's Fool

WERTHER DIED FOR LOVE, and at his lonely funeral, Goethe tells us, "no clergyman attended." It is the book's last sentence. The speaker of *A Lover's Discourse* quotes it some 200 years later to evoke the sense of solitude and total incomprehension felt by the passionate lover, no less today than in the full flood of Romanticism. The discoursing "I," a speaker to whom only the cagiest post-modern would refuse the name of Roland Barthes, complains feelingly that "today there is no system of love." Though Plato made the climb up love's ladder central to his philosophy, "the several systems which surround the contemporary lover offer him no room," or "only an extremely devaluated place." Christian discourse ("if it still exists") and psychoanalysis discount and discountenance what is most real in his experience, denying its validity, counseling sublimation, "turn[ing] him away from what he loves." Marxism simply ignores him. He is left to dream hopelessly of "a philosophy that might 'understand' me—might 'shelter' me."

To develop a philosophy of love has been the project that has occupied Irving Singer over the past quarter-century, though Barthes, even if he had known of it, would hardly have felt it filled his need. From his vantage point as a professor of philosophy at M.I.T., a human being, and (it is easy to infer) a lover, Singer set out to survey the vast literature, both philosophic and imaginative, in which the strongest and most serious minds of our civilization have considered The Nature of Love, the title of the work he now brings to completion with this final volume, subtitled *The Modern World.*[1] But he has done more than survey. This is not merely an excursion into old-fashioned history of ideas, although the judicious and readable summaries it contains make it a useful reference work for those with a yen to find out the easy way what St. Bernard or David Hume thought about love. (It *is* easy. Professor Singer explicitly invites selective reading of his 1000+ pages, calling his examinations of successive figures "Pictures at an Exhibition" and repeating often for the convenience of the skimmer.) But Singer is a philosopher before he is an historian, and his enterprise, even more old-fashioned perhaps, is a philosophical

[1] THE NATURE OF LOVE: The Modern World, by *Irving Singer*. University of Chicago Press. Volume III. $24.95.

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one: to report how others have considered love in order that he may consider it himself, discover its nature, and provide a system which can be taken as valid for the modern humanist, capable, on occasion, of feeling love as transcendent, yet unable to agree that it comes from—or can lead us to—any transcendental source.

It is a tall order, but Professor Singer is a convinced optimist. His very scope proclaims it. *The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther*[2] first appeared in 1966, and on the way to Luther, besides Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Ovid, and Lucretius, it carries us through Christian ideas of love, human and divine, in Augustine, Aquinas, Bonaventure, Richard of St. Victor, Abelard, and St. Bernard, with side-glances at the Old and New Testaments, Hinduism and Buddhism, and at many lesser-known figures such as Gregory of Nyssa and St. John Climacus. *The Nature of Love: Courtly and Romantic,*[3] published nearly twenty years later, covers the *fin' amors* of the troubadours, Andreas Capellanus' curiously duplicitous *Tractatus,* the legendary love of Tristan and Iseult and the actual love of Abelard and Heloise, Petrarch, Cavalcanti, and Dante (already considered in Volume I in connection with religious love). For combining the idealist and realist perspectives which Singer first locates in Plato and Ovid, Shakespeare earns a place at the center of the volume, indeed of the entire work. Donne and Milton follow, also with high marks, then Rousseau, Sade, and Stendhal, in preparation for "Benign Romanticism" (Kant, Schlegel, Hegel, Shelley) and "Romantic Pessimism" (Goethe, Novalis, Schopenhauer, Wagner). All this before we enter "The Modern World," which will add Kierkegaard, Tolstoy, Nietzsche, Freud, Proust, Lawrence, Shaw, Santayana, Sartre, and Buber—to mention only those treated at some length.

Singer's division into pessimistic and benign is not incidental. He is unashamedly judgmental; judgment is essential to his philosophical project, and his judgment is always on the side of optimism. His own voice is in continual dialogue with the voices of the past. He summarizes, as fully as he has room for and as fairly as he is able; he welcomes the historian's obligation to understand. But he summarizes in order to weigh, to sift, to praise, to reject, in the interests of his own hopes for a pluralistic synthesis of the fervent idealistic tradition which stretches from Plato to Santayana, and the clear-eyed but reductive realism whose modern representative is Freud. Of each thinker he asks the same straightforward question: Does he—except for Mme. de Lafayette, no female writers are considered—envisage,

[2] THE NATURE OF LOVE: Plato to Luther, by *Irving Singer.* University of Chicago Press. Volume I. $29.95; 15.95.

[3] THE NATURE OF LOVE: Courtly and Romantic, by *Irving Singer.* University of Chicago Press. Volume II. $34.95; $16.95.

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better yet, does he celebrate, a love which shall be both (hetero)sexual and stable, manifesting itself not only in the irrational magic that idealists value and realists mock or condemn, but in the lasting glow of a trustworthy relationship?

Singer's judgment is never surreptitious; it is not his intention to put anything over on us. He presents his own conceptualization of the nature of love in the opening chapters of Volume I, and twenty years later it has undergone only the slightest of modifications. By it he judges his chosen writers, one by one. His touchstone is a simple, yet original discrimination between two attitudes toward a love object, attitudes which he calls "appraisal" and "bestowal." (The verbal choices that face the reviewer neatly confirm Singer's central contrast between idealism and realism. The scientism of "object" is unattractive and false to experience, yet romantic mists surround the otherwise accurate "beloved." Singer, to his credit, tends toward the latter.)

Love, for Singer, is fundamentally "a way of valuing." Appraisal, therefore, is part of the process, the part that is most generally recognized. It is a rational process, a way of knowing. It "seeks to find an objective value" in the object, one that is "open to public verification." The loved object actually *is* beautiful, witty, warmhearted, or whatever; a representative sample of society would agree (or disagree, in which case the appraisal is incorrect). But we do not love as representatives of society; having our own needs and desires, we make our own individual appraisals of the object's ability to satisfy them. And beyond this individual appraisal (which may ratify society's or contradict it) is bestowal, the "value added" that we give as tribute to a particular personhood. "To love a woman as a person [rather than desire her as an instrument] is to desire her for the sake of values that appraisal might discover, and yet to place one's desire within a context that affirms her importance regardless of those values." Bestowal is a work not of reason but imagination, a creative act in which "one human being affirms the significance of another, much as a painter highlights a figure by defining it in a sharpened outline." In bestowal, value is not merely recognized, it is created. "That is why one can rarely convince a man that his beloved is unworthy of him. For his love is a creative means of *making* her more worthy." Though "he invests her with greater value," he has not thereby made her a better person, though "that may happen." It is himself he changes. "To bestow value is to augment one's own being as well as the beloved's."

Ideally, of course, the process is reciprocal; Singer's exposition slips easily from singular into plural. "Lovers create within themselves a remarkable capacity for affective response, an ability to use their emotions, their words, their deeds for bestowing value." The lover's affinity for poetry may not be coincidental: "Like the artist, by deploying his imagination in the art of bestowing value, by caring about the independent being of another person, the lover adds a new

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dimension to the beloved." It may of course be illusory, undeserved, as a long train of realists has maintained. But it need not be. Singer views imagination with Romantic approval, not Renaissance mistrust. "Though lovers do commit errors of judgment . . . love itself is not illusory." Its well-known aberrations are "adventitious to it, not definitive. As love is not primarily a way of knowing, neither is it a way of making mistakes." And by this time, Singer is ready for a full definition: "Love is an imaginative means of bestowing value that would not exist otherwise."

The motive force that has propelled Singer through his twenty-year enterprise manifests itself in the enthusiasm of his description of bestowal in action, "caring about the needs and interests of the beloved, . . . wishing to benefit or protect her, . . . delighting in her achievements, . . . encouraging her independence while accepting and sustaining her dependency, . . . respecting her individuality, . . . giving her pleasure, . . . taking pleasure in her, . . . feeling glad when she is present and sad when she is not, . . . sympathizing with her weaknesses and depending upon her strength, . . . developing common pursuits, . . . allowing her to become second nature to him, . . . having a need to increase their society with other human beings upon whom they can jointly bestow value, . . . wanting children who may perpetuate their love." It sounds very much like traditional marriage, and that is what it is. Since 1966, Singer has opened to the possibility of lasting homosexual love (that is, he tries hard not to exclude it, when he thinks of it), and he certainly doesn't require sacramental or legal sanction. Nevertheless, the criterion by which he judges all thinking on love, from Plato to Proust, is the degree to which it finds room for the marriage of true minds and bodies, a marriage which shall not be Time's fool.

Plato fails the test—on the score not of homosexuality but of personhood. The *Symposium*'s ladder of love influenced all subsequent idealist formulations of love, human and divine: by it the lover climbs from human particularities to the love of abstract universals. But Plato does not wish to love the beloved for himself (certainly not for herself), but as a manifestation of an ideal of beauty remembered from the realm of universal Forms. In a supreme idealization of correct appraisal, the lover should not bestow value, but recognize Value. And the love of Beauty, complains Singer, or even the Good, is unlikely to lead to a lasting relationship. We may feel that Singer's phrase, "Platonic promiscuity," is a bit unfair to the lovers of the *Phaedrus,* whose souls, Socrates says, will after death have identical plumage, but Singer has his own brand of realism. If it's Beauty you love, one lovely youth is likely to be followed by another; after Phaedrus, Charmides.

Ever reasonable, Aristotle prefers friendship to love, and friends, though their association is based on rational appraisal, do value each other as individuals. But though Aristotelian *philia* is stable and

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satisfying, it isn't very sexy, and sexuality is essential to Singer's conception. Ovid does a good job on mutually enjoyable sex (as sternly rejected by Plato as it is deeply experienced), but nevertheless, Singer can't approve; "Ovid consistently views participants in love as selfish opponents, both jockeying for power." Looking back over the centuries, Singer arraigns him for "shallowness of moral insight"; he is Freud's "sensualist . . . who cannot love others because really he does not love himself either," a libertine who "hides his head in a froth of egocentric pleasure," perhaps, speculates Singer, because he fears the overwhelming experience of the kind of love—illustrated by Plotinus—that seeks to lose itself by merging with an Absolute.

Singer isn't usually this hard on his theoreticians of love. Almost always sympathetic, never dismissive, and much more thorough than this review can suggest, he nevertheless finds that, one way or another, most of them fail to measure up. Dante is too transcendental, for all his sympathy for Francesca; Petrarch and Cavalcanti are too despairing. Courtly love fares somewhat better; both ideal and sexual, Singer argues that it was neither inherently adulterous nor inherently tragic. Whatever we make of Tristan and Iseult, Tristan's parents, Blancheflor and Rivalin, and Aucassin and Nicolette show what Freud was not the first to deny, that love can survive marriage. But it is Shakespeare who wins the accolade of "Philosopher of Love." If *Romeo and Juliet* shows him idealizing love, there's *Troilus and Cressida* to speak for harsh realism. The realism of Beatrice and Benedick is more helpful; "the solidity of [their] love results from their wise adjustment to each other's temporal nature," showing us that "you cannot love truly if you expect too much either of yourself or your beloved. . . ." Antony and Cleopatra, too, love each other as they are, with a love both real and transcendent. Cleopatra touchingly affirms marriage as she, dying, says what she could not in life: "Husband, I come," and in *The Winter's Tale,* "the mystical goodness of married love" is affirmed as "a consummation as natural as the ingesting of wholesome food." Milton, too, is praised for his celebration of "Holy Love," not of God but of man and wife, as Adam and Eve retire in the nuptial bower to enact those rites which have surprised generations of students, unprepared for sex in Eden. Our first parents' mutual bestowal of love shows itself able to survive even the pressures of their fallen state—again an affirmation that ideality and reality can learn to live together.

But such harmony as Shakespeare and Milton (and Donne) achieve seems to be unique, in Singer's mind, to seventeenth-century England. Of eighteenth-century figures, it is Rousseau to whom Singer gives his fullest treatment. (It's odd, considering his emphasis on fulfilled sexuality, that there are only two passing references to Blake.) And Rousseau's tangled contradictions aren't much help. A man of feeling, he may write as an idealist who thinks of true love as "an imaginative union transcending both sexual love and marriage"

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(*La Nouvelle Héloise*); he may recommend, as in *Emile*, coolly rational affection; or, in his autobiographical writings, render both doubtful. His realization of the role of imagination in love, however, so important to Singer's concept of bestowal, prepares us for Romantics like Stendhal. But Stendhal, too, is contradictory; love is a disease, a folly, but (in Stendhal's own words) a "folly which nevertheless procures for mankind the greatest pleasures that their species is given to enjoy on earth." Grateful words, and well worth quoting; nevertheless, concludes Singer, "he has virtually no conception what a happy marriage might be like."

Singer finds his benign Romantics more useful. Though he does not minimize the differences between Kant, Schlegel, Hegel, and Shelley, what is important to him is the optimistic and praiseworthy idealism they share. In their different ways they see love as a way, even the way, for individuals to merge with something greater. They may, as with Schlegel, merge with each other, in a union in which the female supplies the affective deficiencies of the male; Singer likes his benign Romantics for respecting women. But love may lead beyond, to a merging with mankind as a whole, with Nature, with the Absolute—as pagan and Christian mystics had imagined merging with the Divine. Singer's own commitment to personhood precludes merging; he prefers "wedding," which recognizes the inherent separateness of individuals. But he praises his Romantics for their "benign, affirmative, even healthy-minded approach toward human possibilities," for "believing that happiness in love, including married love, is not only worth attaining but attainable on earth."

Against them he arrays the Romantic pessimists, culminating in Wagner, in whose *Tristan* he finds the real source of the tragic merging of love in death which Denis de Rougemont incorrectly blamed on courtly love. For the committed optimist, Liebestod has neither attraction nor necessity. What lies ahead is not death but a better philosophy. "Questions about the nature of sexual love," neglected by "Anglo-Saxon philosophers in our century," are being addressed by "psychoanalytic theory, ethology, sociobiology, and other behavioral studies of human affect," life sciences which, "devoted to ideals of health and harmonious functioning in nature, belong to a new ideology which offers great hope for the future." "The work," writes Professor Singer, "is still in progress; the contemporary synthesis of realism and idealism, of verifiable truth and meaningful aspiration, remains an unfinished cathedral in the mind," and though as yet we see only the groundwork, "coming generations may someday marvel when they see what was being built."

So ends Volume Two, published not in the heady sixties but in 1984. After that, it might seem a bit of a disappointment to realize how little comfort the healthy-minded lover can get from the major figures examined in Volume III. But Singer is used to that; he has his own theory to sustain him. Turning to those promising life sciences,

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he will find support in the modified Freudianism of Melanie Klein and John Bowlby, the familiar research on attachment of Konrad Lorenz and Harry Harlow, and more recently, in sociobiology's suggestions of a biological grounding for altruism. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Tolstoy ("anti-Romantic Romantics") are marvelous but scarcely encouraging. Singer can pay tribute to Santayana, in a sympathetic and welcome chapter, but he can't use him. Shaw and Lawrence ("twentieth-century Puritans") he finds reasonably healthy-minded, though it's a surprise to learn that Lawrence called *Tristan and Isolde* "very near pornography." But his major space is devoted to the gloomier conclusions of Sartre, Proust, and above all, Freud.

Freud, indeed, has been with us from the beginning; even in Volume I he got more pages than Augustine or Aquinas, more than anybody but Plato. Freudian pessimism—or realism—has evidently been the continuing whetstone against which Singer has honed his optimism. For Freud, appraisal is all. Nothing escapes it, not love's tenderest illusions, not even the commandment to love our neighbor. Freud will love his neighbor only if he "deserves" it, and he deserves it (Singer quotes the passage at length) only if he is enough like Freud so that Freud can "love myself in him." The supply of libido is limited, anyway, according to Freud's well-known hydraulic theory; more here means less there, and what goes to the stranger is unavailable for family and friends.

This is the supreme challenge to the idea of bestowal and the creation of value. Singer, curiously, has ignored the long disquisition on love which Dante puts at the center of the *Purgatorio,* or he might have made use of Dante's discrimination between material goods, which are diminished by sharing, and spiritual goods, which are increased. But a real lover doesn't need Dante to tell him that. St. Francis said (in a prayer that Singer doesn't quote) that it is in giving that we receive; Singer has the same conviction, although as a secularist he would rather ground it in biology: "Freud seems to be unaware of the ways in which creative and imaginative bestowals may also be innately programmed in organisms such as ours." But if Freud offers the lover no encouragement, Sartre is no better and Proust is worse: he calls love "une torture réciproque." If Proust is to be taken as the representative novelist of modern love, the artists of "the modern world" have no more to offer than the philosophers, and there's nothing for it but to return to Donne and Shakespeare. *The Nature of Love* is, as I said, an old-fashioned book.

Even its moderns are old-fashioned. They are certainly not post-modern; Singer has done a little boning up on recent feminist writing, but there is no mention of the lesbian challenge, no reference to Barthes or Foucault or to recent researches on the history of homosexual love. And it seems too bad, among these old-fashioned moderns, to give us so many pages on Proust's reciprocal torture, and not a word for the marriage of Leopold and Molly Bloom, which like

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Jim and Nora's, combines appraisal and bestowal as if the principals had read Singer's book. An optimist, after all, should appreciate that final "Yes." The supreme artistic realization of Singer's view of love, in fact, isn't found inside *The Modern World* but on its cover: a wonderfully chosen photograph of Brancusi's *The Kiss.* It's not beautiful and romantic like that more famous *Kiss* of Rodin, which was meant to evoke the doomed love of Paolo and Francesca. Cartoon-like in technique and in effect, it's a heavy, squared-off block into which a male and female are not so much carved as scraped. They do not emerge from the chunk of rough stone, they *are* the chunk. There is nothing ideal about them, nothing fine; their crudely schematised hair, their foolish pop eyes, deliberately invite the familiar old-fashioned dismissal of "modern art": "My eight-year-old could do as well as that." Yet wait. With their unarticulated, strip-like arms, how tightly they embrace! Look further; unexpectedly, the breast of the chunky woman, flattened against her chunky lover, whose chunky face is glued to hers by cartoon lips, is carved with the soft contour of the master sculptor. It doesn't matter if we think they're beautiful; the value they bestow is the value they've created, and that their creator has bestowed upon them. Around the ungainly block you can see, if you've read enough Singer, an ideal space. Brancusi's sculpture concretizes, almost literally (for all I know, it *is* concrete) the distinction Singer arrives at at the end of his long work, the distinction between falling in love, being in love, and staying in love. You couldn't put a knife-blade between these lovers; they're together for good. It's not the love Werther died for, and Singer's system doesn't provide much shelter for Roland Barthes. But it certainly is nice—nicer, of course, if you're old-fashioned.

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ANTHONY STORR

Freud Revisited

THE APPETITE FOR BOOKS ABOUT FREUD shows no sign of diminishing, and Gay's massive biography is a notable addition to the literature.[1] Peter Gay is Sterling Professor of History at Yale; a graduate of the Western New England Institute of Psychoanalysis, an honorary member of the American Psychoanalytic Association, and the indefatigable author of some sixteen books on cultural history including *The Bourgeois Experience: Victoria to Freud*, of which two large volumes have so far appeared. Gay is not only industrious, but has an unrivalled capacity for assimilating information, reducing it to order, and presenting it in readable form. Potential readers should not be deterred by the length of this biography. Gay wears his learning lightly; and, although a formidable apparatus of notes and bibliographical essays attest his scholarship, this is never allowed to disturb the smooth flow of his narrative.

Amongst the many previous biographies and reminiscences of Freud the man, Ernest Jones's three-volume account *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work*, remains a classic, excellent on psychoanalytic theory, though somewhat flawed by Jones's partisanship and intolerance of dissenters. Ronald W. Clark's *Freud; the Man and the Cause* failed to show sufficient grasp of psychoanalysis itself, but thoroughly explored what was then known of Freud's life. Gay has had access to a good deal of hitherto unavailable material, and also has a first-rate, insider understanding of psychoanalytic theory, of which he is an excellent exponent. This new biography is therefore superior to its major predecessors, although, as Gay ruefully points out, research into Freud's life can never be complete until the dragons who guard the Freud Archives release the whole of Freud's correspondence. In a preface, Gay lists many areas of Freud's life which still elude detailed scrutiny, including the vexed question of his relations with his sister-in-law, his unorthodoxy in analyzing his own daughter Anna, his use of cocaine, and his indebtedness to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, with whose ideas he was familiar when he was a student, but whose works he claimed not to have read until late in his life.

As one might expect of a cultural historian, Gay gives a good picture of the urban milieu in which Freud developed his ideas. Freud's family, which moved from Freiberg to Leipzig and then, in

[1] FREUD: A Life for Our Time, by *Peter Gay*. W. W. Norton. $25.00.

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1860, to Vienna, was only one unit amongst a vast number of Jewish immigrants who entered the city during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. "By the 1880s, at least half of all Viennese journalists, physicians, and lawyers were Jews." Freud, although he never practiced the Jewish religion, was very conscious of being a Jew, regularly attended the meetings of his local Jewish society, and made few friends who were not Jewish. He first encountered anti-Semitism at the University of Vienna, and reacted militantly, later claiming that his lack of acceptance fostered his originality and independence of mind. Freud repeatedly alleged that he hated Vienna; but he refused to leave it until forced to do so in 1938 after the Nazi Anschluss. Although psychoanalysis has often been specifically labelled as both Viennese and Jewish, Gay thinks that Freud could have developed his ideas in any city with a first-rate medical school and a sufficiency of private patients.

One puzzle which Gay fails to solve is Freud's relation to, and understanding of, science. As a young man, Freud worked in the laboratories of men like Ernst Brücke who were entirely committed to explaining all vital processes, both physical and mental, in terms of physics and chemistry. Freud remained a determinist in theory, and always affirmed that psychoanalysis was a science. In 1896, Freud claimed that premature sexual experience was the cause of hysteria, and quoted eighteen cases to support his theory. But this was Freud's last attempt to give figures concerning aetiology, and even then there were no controls. We are still far from understanding how it came about that so rigorous an anatomist and physiologist could continue to believe that psychoanalytic procedures and theories were scientific.

September 23, 1989 will constitute the fiftieth anniversary of Freud's death. It should surely now be possible to estimate his achievements objectively. But difficulties still remain. There is something in the old complaint that no one who has not been analyzed can really understand psychoanalysis. But those who have been analyzed, like Peter Gay, tend to accept psychoanalytic theory as if it were proven truth rather than what it is: a hotchpotch of techniques and hypotheses of varying validity. Gay is less adulatory than Ernest Jones: but he is still too little critical of Freud in many areas.

For example, consider Freud's famous case histories. There are only six extended accounts of individual patients in Freud's writings. These include the case of Judge Schreber, whom Freud analyzed from his autobiography but never saw; and the child "Little Hans," whose father acted as an intermediary. Freud used Judge Schreber's memoirs of his own insanity to construct a psychopathology of paranoia, based upon repression and projection of homosexual impulses which he assumed were originally directed toward the patient's father. Because Schreber's father was a well-known physician and pedagogue, Freud assumed that he was a benign figure who would be especially likely to evoke a son's admiration. In fact, Dr.

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Daniel Schreber was an authoritarian monster who imposed a variety of physical restraints upon his children designed to straighten their bodies and prevent masturbation. Freud's failure to discover the true nature of Schreber's father prevented him from understanding the Judge's delusions, some of which were based upon the horrific appliances which he had had to endure in early childhood. In any case, Freud's interpretation of paranoia is questionable. Freud had virtually no clinical experience with psychotic cases.

Four cases were personally analyzed by Freud: "Dora," the "Rat Man," an unnamed young female homosexual, and the "Wolf Man." Peter Gay is rightly critical of Freud's handling of "Dora." She was the daughter of an unhappily married couple who were close friends of another couple, Herr and Frau K. Dora's father was having an affair with Frau K. Herr K. had made sexual advances to Dora when she was fourteen. Four years later, he renewed his advances, proposing to divorce his wife and then marry Dora. She repudiated him; but, according to her father, developed hysterical symptoms on this account. Freud was convinced that, in spite of her repeated denials, Dora was in love with Herr K. He overwhelmed her with interpretations, and finally bullied her into agreeing with him, although only after she had decided to terminate her treatment. Gay writes: "What is astonishing about the case history of Dora is not that Freud delayed it for four years, but that he published it at all." It is certainly an example which demonstrates Freud's impatience and absolute conviction of his own rightness, in spite of evidence to the contrary.

However, Gay is far less critical than he might have been about Freud's other cases. For example, he does not mention John Bowlby's reinterpretation of the case of "Little Hans," in which Bowlby argues that the child's phobia of horses was more likely to have been provoked by Hans's mother threatening to abandon him than by the child's fear of castration for incestuous wishes toward her, as Freud supposed. Nor does he discuss Freud's treatment of the eighteen-year-old girl whose parents were concerned about her homosexual preferences. Today, no analyst would attempt to treat her, for, as Freud wrote: "she was not in any way ill (she did not suffer from anything in herself, nor did she complain of her condition)." It is clear that Freud took her into treatment in order to satisfy his own curiosity; and it is small wonder that his efforts were unsuccessful.

Gay is also inclined to be too kind to Freud's therapeutic achievements with his most famous patient, the "Wolf Man." He does not shirk the fact that, after an initial improvement, the "Wolf Man" relapsed and had further analysis from other analysts. But he skates over the "Wolf Man" 's own report that what had helped him were not Freud's interpretations, which he regarded as far-fetched, but Freud's kindness, interest in his case, and fatherly concern for him.

It will surprise some readers to realize that, of the cases described by Freud in detail, only one was an undoubted therapeutic success.

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The "Rat Man," a lawyer who complained of horrifying obsessional thoughts of which he could not rid himself, was treated by Freud for eleven months, beginning in October 1907. He made an excellent recovery. There must have been other good outcomes; but therapeutic results were never Freud's principal interest. The paucity of his data bears witness to the fact that what interested him was theory rather than therapy. His cases were designed to illustrate his ideas about the functions of the mental apparatus rather than to demonstrate the cure of neurosis.

The more one re-reads Freud's papers on art and artists, the less illuminating they seem. Gay quotes Freud's view that "play and fantasy alike reflect states of dissatisfaction," and quotes his remark: "One may say, the happy person never fantasizes; only the unsatisfied one does." Freud's view of the imagination as escapist rather than as innovative does not stand up to scrutiny. Gay writes: "He was no romantic celebrating the artist as the nearly divine maker; his reluctance to acknowledge the purely creative aspects of the writer's and painter's work is palpable."

Even so, Gay underplays one of Freud's grosser errors in this field by relegating discussion of his paper "Dostoevsky and Parricide" to brief mention by way of a footnote and an appended bibliographical essay. Joseph Frank, in his definitive biography of the novelist, demonstrates conclusively that Freud's interpretation of Dostoevsky's psychopathology is based upon a misconceived notion that Dostoevsky's father was a violent man; an idea which itself is derived from Freud's faulty recall of a footnote in a biography which he had read some time previously. "Dostoevsky and Parricide" is guesswork based upon inaccurate information.

The same strictures apply to Freud's unfortunate excursions into anthropology. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud postulated that the origins of morality and religion could be traced back to an actual event in the history of mankind: the primal slaughter of the father. He considered that this horrific happening had left "ineradicable traces in the history of humanity." In spite of his admiration for, and debt to, Darwin, Freud remained an unashamed Lamarckian who believed in the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Even Gay finds it hard to defend Freud's anthropological fantasies.

Gay's biography has many merits. Although unwieldily long, it remains readable. It is packed with information, and the interface between life and works is skilfully managed. Yet many questions about Freud and psychoanalysis which one would have expected a cultural historian to address remain unanswered. How is it that a technique of treating the neurotic symptoms of the Viennese upper-middle classes developed into a worldwide movement; a system of ideas which so radically altered the way in which twentieth-century man thinks about himself that Freud has been compared with Marx and Darwin? How much part did Freud's own personality play in the

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promulgation of his theories, and how much depended upon the happy accident of their appearing at the right time in history? Gay and other Freudians might argue that psychoanalysis won such wide acceptance because, in essence, if not in detail, its theories are true. Yet many would dispute this. Nearly fifty years after the death of its founder, psychoanalysis is still debated territory.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Darwin's ideas on evolution had won acceptance. The time was ripe for a psychology which was based upon "instinct"; that is, upon drives which man could be seen to share with other animals. Darwin not only dispelled the notion of man as a special creation, but also attempted to reduce complex behavior to simple biological origins. Freud tried to do the same thing. It seems probable that one reason why psychoanalysis was so widely accepted was that it appeared to fit in with the new biology.

Moreover, psychoanalysis appeared at a time when conventional religious belief was declining. Freud always denied that psychoanalysis provided a *Weltanschauung*, and claimed that he looked at the world through the eyes of a scientist. Yet all except a few fundamentalists agree that psychoanalysis is far from being a science, since its theories cannot be used for prediction and are difficult to validate by scientific methods. By taking psychoanalysis outside the physician's office, Freud himself contributed to making it into a system which not only explained the various forms of mental illness, but also applied to art, literature, humor, religion, and social structure. In an age in which many found themselves feeling rootless and insecure, psychoanalysis offered a secular belief system which was bound to appeal to those who had abandoned the old faiths. Exactly the same is true of Marxism.

Freud's own personality greatly contributed to the widespread acceptance of psychoanalysis. Freud was a wonderfully persuasive writer, who dealt with opposition by inventing imaginary opponents, marshalling their arguments for them, and then demolishing them. He appeared austere, dedicated, and serious. Moreover, he was absolutely convinced that he was right. Although Freud himself altered his theories as psychoanalysis grew and developed, no one else was allowed to do so. Gay's book bears witness to Freud's intolerance of opposition, but fails to emphasize the powerful effect of absolute conviction on winning adherents and converting doubters. Sir Peter Medawar dismissed psychoanalysis as "a stupendous intellectual confidence trick." This pejorative appraisal is clearly wrong, since it fails to recognize the undoubted heuristic value of many psychoanalytic interpretations. Even if every hypothesis which Freud advanced could be shown to be wrong, we should still be greatly in his debt. His fertile, ingenious mind did cause a revolution in the way we think. As Karl Popper claims for science, refutation of existing hypotheses leads to progress.

Although psychoanalysis in its original form has not proved more

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effective than other forms of psychotherapy in the treatment of neurosis, Freud's technique of listening to distressed people over long periods has had a strikingly beneficial effect upon all forms of psychotherapy. Even those who do not lose all their symptoms gain a sense of being accepted as persons and an increased understanding of themselves. Freud's passion for investigation and his lack of therapeutic enthusiasm led, ironically, to his most important legacy. Anyone can give advice to people in distress. It was Freud who taught us how to listen.

Gay's biography is a step on the way to understanding Freud's importance. There is still a long way to go.

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MARK JARMAN

An Old Master and Four New Poets

LIKE MANY READERS OF MY GENERATION, I first became aware of W. S. Merwin's poetry after he had perfected the radical change in style that led to *The Moving Target* and *The Lice*. Reading Richard Howard's essay on Merwin's poetry in *Alone with America* led me to the first four books, *A Mask for Janus*, *The Dancing Bears*, *Green with Beasts*, and *The Drunk in the Furnace*. That Merwin was a master of traditional forms, as demonstrated in those books, was as exciting a revelation as the departures of the subsequent books which in their many editions (*The Lice* has gone into something like seventeen printings) have made him famous. Now Merwin has published his *Selected Poems*[1] and it is a good thing that he published the first four books in *The First Four* thirteen years ago. *A Mask for Janus* and *The Dancing Bears*, which contained many of his most elegant formal lyrics and ballads, are seriously slighted in this new selection. However, he has done an excellent job of editing *Green with Beasts*, *The Drunk in the Furnace*, *The Moving Target*, *The Lice*, and especially the overlong *The Carrier of Ladders*. As for *Writings for an Unfinished Accompaniment* and *The Compass Flower*, they are weaker books and it is hard to say how well he has salvaged the better poems in them; certain ones do stand out. Since *The Lice*, which is his most sustained and masterful book, Merwin has become a poet of the superb individual poem, the masterpiece, surrounded by work of the second rank which is elevated only because of its identifiable style. *Opening the Hand*, the latest book included in *Selected Poems*, signified a return to some subjects of *The Drunk in the Furnace*, particularly his family, and introduced Hawaii as a setting. Along with his *Selected Poems*, Merwin has published a new volume[2] in which his oracular voice prophesies on ecology from the rain forests of Hawaii. The presiding metaphor is that of a lost language. What is striking is how Merwin has edited his *Selected Poems* so that his current concern—the destruction of the earth—seems to be inherent almost from the beginning.

It should not be news that Merwin has tried out, mastered, and innovated just as many forms of the modern lyric as are now being practiced, yet his own influence appears to have waned. I say "appears" because although his style—the lack of punctuation, the

[1] SELECTED POEMS, by *W. S. Merwin*. Atheneum. $22.95; $12.95.
[2] THE RAIN IN THE TREES, by *W. S. Merwin*. Alfred A. Knopf. $16.95; $8.95.

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free verse lines, the elemental surrealism—no longer marks the efforts of younger poets, the current factions of poetry are reflected in the range of his accomplishments. For the new formalist, the neo-narrative poet, the language poet, the writer of the free verse lyric, for each of these there is a Merwin and it would be a good thing to come to terms with him. What his best poems show is the necessity of an urgent subject expressed completely within the form suited to it. There is a vast difference between "Ballad of John Cable and Three Gentlemen," "East of the Sun and West of the Moon," "The Mountain," "Grandmother Watching at Her Window," "Home for Thanksgiving," "The Last One," "The Judgment of Paris," "Ballade of the Sayings," "The Coin," and "Yesterday," to name one poem from each of the books selected from, but they have in common a completeness that stands apart from the merely personal. That there are so many obvious masterpieces, and I could double the number easily, argues for Merwin's reputation now and in the future. But what are we to make of a poet now whose style and concerns seem to have been marginalized, if only for the present?

We can try to understand how he sees himself. If the *Selected* is an indication, Merwin sees himself as one who has been trying to learn the language of nature. This struggle in its early stages occurs only as he comes to terms with an unspecified absence. "Learning a Dead Language" from *Green with Beasts* looks prophetic: "You may find at last the passion that composed it, / Hear it both in its speech and in yourself." Also, there is a struggle with the family that results in the devastating portraits that end *The Drunk in the Furnace* and the confessional tone of some poems in *Opening the Hand.* In *The Rain in the Trees* Merwin portrays himself and his parents in a world totally cut off from nature, unable even to name local trees. "The Last One" and "For a Coming Extinction" in *The Lice* provided clear messages of ecological apocalypse when they were first published twenty years ago, but the note of apocalypse was present, too, in the anti-Vietnam War poem "The Asians Dying" and the cynicism of "Peasant." It was the poems of individual loneliness and isolation like "For the Anniversary of My Death" that stuck in the mind. Now, a poem like "Fly," about tormenting a pigeon until it dies, looks like a human indictment as much as a personal confession, ending "Pondering his eye that could not / Conceive that I was a creature to run from / I who have always believed too much in words."

If the earth's ecology is to be Merwin's message, then he must beware that the incantatory tone that distinguishes his style does not elevate his poetry to the pulpit. In *The Rain in the Trees* original sin is located in the ignorance of nature with which he was brought up.

> Neither my father nor my mother knew
> the names of the trees
> where I was born

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what is that
I asked and my
father and mother did not
hear they did not look where I pointed

To atone for this lack, which he connects with the despoliation of the world's great forests, including those of Hawaii where he now lives, he writes in "Witness,"

I want to tell what the forests
were like

I will have to speak
in a forgotten language

What Merwin has to say has a coherence and integrity in this book that has been missing since *The Lice*, but at the same time it has a singlemindedness that makes for strange and possibly accidental ambiguities. Two poems are particularly troubling. One is "Chord" in which the career and death of Keats is paralleled with the cutting down of the sandalwood forests. "While he thought of the Grecian woods they bled under red flowers / while he dreamed of wine the trees were falling from the trees." The power of the litany is undeniable, but somehow Keats is tainted with this sin and it doesn't seem fair. Keats appears to be a stand-in for Merwin's own sense of remorse. The other problematic poem is "The Rose Beetle," the last poem in the book. It addresses a pest from China that turns the leaves of many plants in Hawaii "into lace / into an arid net / into sky." Does it represent all the insidious elements from the outside world brought, even blindly and involuntarily, into Paradise? Yet another poem, "To the Insects," addresses them as "Elders," and "After the Alphabets" begins "I am trying to decipher the language of insects" and ends "they are never important they are everything." Do they represent a final triumph of the natural world even as they themselves feed rapaciously on it, much as man does? But I don't want to turn my puzzlement into carping. As with each of his books there are outstanding poems. Two of them here are "After School," a remarkable memory of boarding school, and the Roethkesque "Empty Water." The latter begins "I miss the toad / who came all summer / to the limestone / water basin" and ends "come back / believer in shade / believer in silence and elegance / believer in ferns / believer in patience / believer in the rain." Roethke with his heterodox, undogmatic empathy for the natural world is a fitting spirit for the best of Merwin's new poems.

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Paul Lake shows a contemporary gift for meter in his first book[3] and would probably be among those who admire the Merwin of his first four books in which idiom is set to meter without distorting it. There is nothing smug in Lake's poems, as there is in some of the so-called new formalist lyrics. He often sounds appalled or distressed, amused but never superior. In a short poem that is an example of the sort of humor possible only in meter and rhyme, he gives this portrait of a beautiful young student who

> Knows in her bones how little poetry
> Words breathe, and how—on turning to go home—
> All eyes will watch her rise above her "C"
> And walk off, like a goddess on the foam.
>
> "Introduction to Poetry"

Lake tries out a number of formal modes, lyric, narrative, and dramatic, but the quest in *Another Kind of Travel* (his metaphor for sleep) is for a home. California, where he attended school, is here, Arkansas where he now resides, the inner city and the country, and the moon. Lake is good at pinpointing the *isolato*—the teacher in an inner-city school, a dieter, a hypochondriac, a professional student—and writing of the "distances" that are "everywhere around us."

> The days and nights, the mountains and the deserts—
> and the small towns circumscribed by salt-flats, prairies,
> badlands, buttes, plateaus, or surrounded by corn—
> how the passing eye can size them up in a second
> at a bus stop or gas station . . .
>
> "Crossing America by Bus"

Lake's individual gift, the thing that sets this book apart as more than a series of deftly executed occasions for poems, is for the dramatic monologue and the narrative. The three exceptional poems are "The Rooster," a tall tale of small-town life, "Hog Killing Christmas," and the best of them all, "The Boat." A young poet, or any American poet, coming to narrative for the first time and wishing to tell a story through another person, must come to terms with Frost. I think this is true, also, about meter in American poetry. A better model than Frost would be hard to find and worse ones abound. In "The Boat," while waiting for their husbands to return home from hunting, one woman tells another a story about a boyfriend who drowned in a freak accident when they took out her father's boat and it sank.

[3] ANOTHER KIND OF TRAVEL, by *Paul Lake*. University of Chicago Press. $20.00; $7.95.

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(It had a cabin small as a doll's house
And a child-sized bunk . . . But we were children then.)
I wish now, when I wish for anything,
To have spent that day, instead, without the sailing,
But there are no insteads. I've learned that much
From piling one instead on top another . . .

The play on "child-sized" and "children" and the metaphor of "piling one instead on top another" is worthy of Frost. If Lake misses at all it is in the poem's last line wherein the speaker describes the sunken boat "Hauling its nightmare tonnage of dark water." That doesn't sound as if anyone would say it. Frost, in his dramatic monologues, might let his characters speechify, but their words were always authentic. Still, with respect to Merwin's early formal poetry and the larger contribution of Frost, Lake's is a welcome addition to the new formalist aesthetic.

Robin Behn's first book[4] refuses categorization as a miscellany because of the obsessive theme of drowning that binds many of the poems, either fully developed as in "Four Years After Your Deliberate Drowning," which appears to address a lover who committed suicide, or obliquely alluded to as in the title poem and the last poem, "Downproofing Lesson," which is based on rules for avoiding exhaustion if caught in the water. The grief of the original loss of the lover becomes a passionate examination of suffering and survival. Grace is the recognized virtue that keeps us afloat. Actually the best poems in Behn's book are not particularly related to the central motif. Yet they are complete in themselves, fully rendered, and as is so often the case with the successful lyric poet, they offer pleasure instead of puzzlement, integrity instead of fragmentation, because we are not forced to put a story together that is told in pieces.

"Angels" portrays a father who "never said why—not even to me, the silent one . . . he never / fixed anything" but instead "seasoned and stirred / his aquariums, his little wet houses . . ." To earn her father's love his daughter buys a replacement for a dead angelfish she finds at breakfast and "set it down in front of him: / the silver, storebought wife / already married to the water." "Origin" meditates on the poet's own birth and introduces an original proprioception, an awareness of the body, that is staggering and fascinating when the child learns that "certain failed animals / are to be kept in remote / parts of [her] body" and that her teacher has "emergency instructions / she's to follow in case." "In That Year" is a marvelous and surprisingly tactful poem about sexuality. As she is being kissed by her soon-to-be lover he draws back to say "*Do / you know what a colostomy is?*" Then he draws her hand "down his belly / to where the warm tape held the bag / in

[4] PAPER BIRD, by *Robin Behn*. Texas Tech University Press. $15.95; $9.95.

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a kind of lasting kiss." This is a poet, in other words, who takes on risky subjects and brings them to a completeness that masters like Merwin have demonstrated is necessary to good poetry.

I am most impressed by a longish poem here, "Dear Sky," in which there is a voice and a daring and a confidence of expression that I hope to hear more of in Behn's poetry. In the poem the speaker asks the sky to seek out a lover who has been beaten and raped and led the poet to understand "that passion / should be something like sunlight / while the sky looks on and nothing / in the process asks God to raise / the least hand to bless us." Robin Behn's lyric gift is to express emotions one at a time and to their fullest.

Bruce Beasley shows an original imagination and style in the way he retells Biblical stories in his first book.[5] "Death of Lazarus" is particularly effective and ends

> And Lazarus
>
> felt the old hunger return
> to him, like a sickness,
> cloying his body:
> the craving
>
> for meat and sleep, the dread of dying.

Again, Merwin is pertinent here, for like many American poets of his generation Merwin has slowly dispensed with allusive material but only after displaying his genius for it and on brilliant rare occasions, like "The Judgment of Paris," returning to it. It is especially satisfying to see a young American poet confronting and retelling these old stories. Beasley retells the fall from Eden in "From Grace," the cursing of the fig tree in a poem of the same title, the ascension in "Ascension Day" and the Last Supper in "Elegy," which contains this fresh portrait. He writes that Christ looked

> Down the length of the table as though at a dim still life,
> And stalled for a moment his words about all this dying:
>
> While in the back of his mind, a barren fig tree
> Kept shaking its load, a dirty little blossom of a man . . .

That "dirty little blossom" is Judas, of course, who rushes out to betray Jesus and meets the angels who are waiting to assist him. These are not poems of piety, though some are composed as prayers ("Miserere" is especially good with its refrain, "Be merciful") nor are

[5] SPIRITUALS, by *Bruce Beasley*. Wesleyan University Press. $17.00.

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they devotional exactly. They appear in counterpoint to poems about the deaths of the poet's parents. The death of the father, who died young due to alcoholism, haunts these pages in "Novice" and "My Father, Dying." These poems contain painful memories of the man who "mapped / highways through the houses / of families who cursed him— / condemning their land, / driving them into court." Not a sympathetic character that even the pathos of his disease can retrieve, when he is buried "the crushed / magnolia roots, dark / with red clay, slowly / curled themselves back up all around his casket."

Religion as a ground note for poetry is justified if it is part of the poet's life; one can tell this by the poet's familiarity with the subject. Beasley's native Georgia is often evoked, and we associate the South with strong religious upbringings of the sort grown-up poets are glad to get shut of. As a title, *Spirituals* suggests those hymns that came out of the black worship service, which are sung now in white churches, too. But there isn't really any sense of blackness to this poetry. There is, however, a strong sense of style. I do not think it a bad thing that the presiding spirit here is the poet Charles Wright, who has developed an imagistic style that makes his own Southern roots the source of his emblems and his elegiac tone. You can hear Wright in the first seven lines of Beasley's "Talking to My Parents":

> Autumn, and dusk beyond the oak tree,
> Language gone out. The lights
> Of Macon assemble behind me, flickering,
> Checking your dark, stone names.
>
> Magnolias and new graves,
> Rose Hill. A low moon over these fields,
> Damp, and waiting to rise.

As a Southerner Beasley has chosen a good master. *Spirituals* is a book of apprenticeship in which one can see the potential for genius in the retelling of the old stories.

Of these four first books, Jeffrey Harrison's[6] is the most accomplished. His style is so distinct, his gift for the insightful image so satisfying, that it hardly matters that the poems themselves are often dispassionate, flat, even complacent, and the subjects of little importance. The images rise to the placid surfaces of the poems, like dragonfly larvae to the serene top of Bisby Lake where many are set. A wrought iron gate in a cemetery is an underground playpen for dead children, a wasp nest is like a lightbulb, drops from melting ice are like a visual singing of birds, cow nostrils are wide as the eye sockets in human skulls, a scallop squirts you in the eye like a trick

[6] THE SINGING UNDERNEATH, by *Jeffrey Harrison.* E.P. Dutton. $13.95; $7.95.

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rose, and the famous Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. is described for all time as "the back porch of the dead."

The book's vice may be its greatest virtue, for there is a certain impersonality to the best of these poems that allows us to see the matter clearly. A telling contrast occurs between the poems "The Model House" and "Elegy for the Clotheslines." The former describes the marital tension while the poet's wife builds a model house for architecture school. The poet tries to help his wife, they fight, and he goes to bed thinking "This again, another year of architecture school— / your second." It's hard to get worked up about this, although home is where the hurt is. Perhaps I betray a certain prejudice by responding quietly, "I'm sure they'll be OK." The next poem is a tonic to this failed foray into the confessional. The last three lines of "Elegy for the Clotheslines" reveal Harrison's strengths more effectively.

> These abandoned ladders to the sky,
> only ivy climbs them now. But night
> slides down them still into the neighborhood.

One of Harrison's precursors is obviously Elizabeth Bishop, and one can only hope that like her he will seek to write poems that matter because of their connections, their imagery joined as she said only by " 'and' and 'and.' " When Harrison sets himself a potentially dramatic scene, as in the last section of the book entitled "Bisby Lake Poems," he is disappointing. Nothing happens. But in individual poems like "Hornets' Nest," "Moth and Dragonfly: Two Memories," "Graveyard," "Slaughter Cows," and "The Peacock Flounder," to name a handful of the book's many successful poems, the observed subject brings out the poet's best. "The Peacock Flounder" may be Harrison at his best, in fact, saving the emotional charge, the quiet epiphany, for an end he has made his way toward with sheer artistry.

> With what effort did his eyes push
> around to one side, concentrating
> a million years of evolution
> into a few weeks? And how are we
> to understand him if not by a like
> effort of the eyes?—feeling our gaze
> pulled askance by his, our mouths twisting
> until we realize that we, after all,
> are secretly disturbed about our lives.

That "after all" serves as a grace note that speeds up the final iambic pentameter line and is a sign of this young poet's subtle ear. Harrison is a poet to listen for as well as watch.

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ANDREW HUDGINS

From First Books to Collected Poems

BOOKS OF CONTEMPORARY POETRY ARE JUDGED DIFFERENTLY depending on when they appear in the poet's career. For the sake of promise, we'll tolerate a young poet's stiffness or excess as he or she casts around trying to master form, put a voice on the page, and claim a subject. What we look for, I think, are flashes of real poetry—perhaps whole poems, perhaps just passages—in which the verse comes alive, becomes not verse but poetry. It's unfair, after all, to expect every poet's first book to be his *Harmonium* or his *Prufrock and Other Observations*. For later volumes, the ante is higher. We expect greater technical control and a deeper, surer sense from the poet of what his subjects are. We are, in other words, less tolerant of poems that don't offer sustained aesthetic magic. At this stage, we want whole poems, not merely stretches of lyric brilliance; we want coherent aesthetic experiences—and a number of them. By the time we arrive at a poet's volume of selected or collected poems, the stakes are very high indeed. It is, after all, a relatively rare poet who even gets to compile such a volume, and we, as readers, expect it to make a powerful poetic claim on our imaginations. We also expect—fairly, I think—that the volume be not just a bringing together of disparate poems or a chronicle of a poet's life work but also a coherent aesthetic experience in its own right: we expect the poet to have a vision. In this poetry chronicle, I want to consider how, and to what degree, these expectations are satisfied by two first books, two books from the middle of their authors' careers, two volumes of selected poems, and one volume of collected poems.

William Olsen's *The Hand of God and a Few Bright Flowers*[1] contains, in good measure, the excesses of rhetoric and the over-reaching with subject that one almost hopes to find in a poet's first book because they testify to the writer's artistic ambition. Olsen is excited by language and by a poem's ability to yoke together things that may, at first, not seem to belong together. The results are sometimes dazzling and sometimes baffling, depending on whether or not Olsen can make the yoking seem natural. Occasionally, as he labors to bring the elements together, the transitions become protracted and ponderous. Even if he cannot, just yet, always make his poems work coherently, he

[1] THE HAND OF GOD AND A FEW BRIGHT FLOWERS, by *William Olsen*. University of Illinois Press. $8.95p.

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understands the emotional returns of a poem and the surprises that keep us reading. But the effects of his poems too often seem to result more from his own delight with what he can do with language—and do well—than from deep artistic and emotional imperatives. In a passage in "Tomorrow" Olsen plays with the way a poem can telescope time, stretch it, or turn it back on itself. An "old cop" sweeps the driveway he shares with the speaker, as "every tomorrow comes down to the next / moment like the first green sticky hand-grenade / bud of spring about to explode into leaf":

> Then the first leaf kisses the ground
> and scuttles on its rusted tips across our driveway
> until the sycamores are bleached antlers in the sunlight. . . .
> As it happens, the old cop gets knocked off on duty
> many tomorrows ago, and many tomorrows later
> it occurs to me I haven't seen him raking,
> his bicycle tangled in morning glory vines,
> and still more tomorrows later I started this poem
> one morning when I looked back at the bed
> my sleep had messed, betraying me to the knowledge
> that we vacate the past by looking at it.

The time shifts are so dazzling, though a bit smugly dazzling, that they overwhelm the inadequate point that they are claimed, in the final quoted line, to make.

More convincing as a whole poem is "The World's Despite," which traces, through its twists and turns, how World War II affected the poet's family and, thus, the poet himself though he wasn't born until 1954. As his father, uncle, and mother discuss the war at the "bulb-lit kitchen table," the speaker slips down to the cellar, falls asleep, and wakens to the shadows cast by the furnace flames. With a "machine-gun broom" he pretends to shoot down the flames, although "they kept dancing and only I / fell dead, again, again."

James Lasdun's extremely accomplished debut volume of poetry[2] astonishes with its range of tones. The book opens with "The Two of Them," a touching poem, reminiscent of Donald Justice and Philip Larkin, in which the speaker, coming home and joining his parents in the garden for a drink of gin, realizes that such golden moments will sooner or later come to an end:

> A golden, almost luminous tennis ball
> Drops from the dark blue, bounces round our feet,
>
> A compact imp that skitters on in fun,
> Idling to a halt at someone's chair,

[2] A JUMP START, by *James Lasdun*. W.W. Norton. $13.95.

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And then it's like a chill, and I imagine
Arriving to discover no one here,
The two of them now one of them, now none.

Immediately after this quietly powerful poem, as if to establish the poet's range, comes "Buying a Dress," a poem in heroic couplets that swings from rollicking light verse to affectionate teasing and, dizzyingly, to violence and regret. The speaker remembers accompanying his girlfriend as she buys a dress and then blurting his confession of infidelity: "Endings are swift—we taxied home, she took / The dress off, checked the damage, nodded, gripped / a bunch of fabric in each fist, and ripped."

A few of the poems, like "Snake Burning," "Crabs," "A Dinosaur in Rome," and "Jumping" seem like finger exercises, and oddly mannered ones at that. On the other hand, when he has a worthy target firmly in his sights, Lasdun writes wonderful satire and self-satire. In "A Jump Start" two men, one of them the speaker of the poem, attempt to jump start the car of a woman with an "M.Phil / in Women's Studies" who is wearing a "pencil-skirt / And high-heels." In trying to help, they are making "a stand / In this last corner of our realm: / Machinery." At first, in this "dream of impotence," the speaker "couldn't raise a spark," but now he ineptly brushes the other man's arm while they are both touching the car battery: "We leaped up in shock, / A million brilliant snowdrop spears / Flashing like mica schist at the whitening sky." Like Pope, Lasdun is never a satirist just for laughs. He's after the larger implications, even if they are more than a little sinister. "Bridal" is addressed to the newly married bridegroom, who is now "a man without a past"

look how the father
Looms up from dazzling winter sun—
Grin of a species welcoming its own;
One hand on your shoulder, in the other
A champagne bottle smoking like a gun.

Though *A Jump Start* is Lasdun's first book, he is a poet already mature in his art.

After the Noise of Saigon[3] is Walter McDonald's eighth book and the winner of the 1987 Juniper Prize, and in it McDonald claims as his own the landscape of West Texas. These unembellished, stark, and occasionally harsh poems reflect the country they grow out of and return to, much as the author, who teaches at Texas Tech University, returned home after serving in Vietnam. There is a lot of work in

[3] AFTER THE NOISE OF SAIGON, by *Walter McDonald.* University of Massachusetts Press. $15.00; $7.95.

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these poems, in the subject matter as well as the crafting of the poems themselves. The people in McDonald's world tend herd, dig wells, and burn off their fields; and when their herds become infected with an incurable virus they slaughter the cattle, bury them in mass graves, and start over. They also serve their country in World War II or Vietnam and return home to deal with what the title of one poem calls "The Guilt of Survivors." The poems, though, are at their considerable best when they are reticent and terse, and not when, as in "The Guilt of Survivors," they explain a little too much and don't let the obvious speak for itself. The poems about Vietnam are weaker than the others, perhaps because they are alien, in several senses, to the poet's sense of himself, his place, and his art.

The world of *After the Noise of Saigon*—whether Texas or Saigon—is a dangerous place, and its dangers are often courted—by pilots, by swimmers, by mountain climbers. In "Reasons for Taking Risks," McDonald examines why in a dangerous world people seek out still more danger. He might have died, he says, when he was ten years old and dove into the Brazos River; and he still might die so old and worn-out that people will say, "At least he's at peace." Then he remembers an incident when "I could have died climbing the Oberon / last summer, trying hard to release / my son's looped rope." After the danger has passed they reach the peak after nightfall: "We stood a long time staring / as if the night would never end." Given its subject, the poem is remarkable for its utter lack of strutting or bluster; in fact, its tone is one of sorrow, even grief.

What's most impressive about these poems is how McDonald, like almost no one else these days, is able to seize, in love, a landscape and call it his own. In "Balance" he celebrates country that not everyone could celebrate, a country that "grows nothing but pale / yellow yucca and cactus and grass / like dried moss, almost green." It's a country where a snake flicks his tongue as he hunts, "testing the hollow desert wind." And Walter McDonald, like the snake, finds the wind to be "like a god, / the wind always delivering."

One of the epigraphs Jane Flanders uses in her third book, *Timepiece*,[4] is from William Blake: "If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite"; but if she were less unpresuming she might, with equal justice, have chosen Emerson's observation that "the invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common." In her wise and often humorous poems Flanders constantly probes the commonplace, seeking what message it has to reveal about the infinite or to discover in what way a particular moment contains the eternal. Words like "lesson," "study," "know," and "teach" come up repeatedly as she considers, with great perspicacity, the subjects of "Parlor Organ," "Morning

[4] TIMEPIECE, by *Jane Flanders*. University of Pittsburgh Press. $16.95; $8.95.

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Glories," "Big Cats," "Flowering Privet," "Twirling," and "Nightingales in America" to see what they "are telling us," as she says in a poem aptly titled "Messengers." In less skilled hands, this constant search for meaning runs the risk of turning the events of life too easily into metaphor and, thus, denying them their reality. It's a mistake Flanders never makes. She loves the people and the things of this world too profoundly to convert them into abstractions. Poem after poem, she surprises with a relaxed wisdom that is never slack or complacent—a wisdom so deep it seems, at first, simple. In "The Handbell Choir," twelve children play Bach's "Sheep May Safely Graze," and the poem becomes, among other things, a meditation on the passing of culture and faith from generation to generation:

> Having happened, the past is safe.
> This is the dangerous moment, the melody passed
> from hand to hand. Tirelessly, ancient-eyed,
> they raise their bells as if in blessing, yes,
> someone here, now, is blessing us.

The deft echoes of Eliot and Yeats are unobtrusive but absolutely apt for Flanders' subject and theme.

Because of Flanders' personal warmth and her humor the poems avoid becoming austere. "Other Lives of the Romantics," a very funny poem, imagines how different English literary history might have been if Wordsworth had died in 1808 of a "fall while hiking in Scotland"; if Byron had taught Shelley how to swim; if Keats had married Fanny Brawne, established an "apothecary practice in Hampstead," and later "discovered anesthesia"; and if Byron had turned to Calvinism and died in his sleep at ninety-five with his "Ecclesiastical Sonnets" being published posthumously. Flanders' love of the romantics runs deeply through *Timepiece.* In "Playing the Romantics" she remembers how, as she played the piano, "Chopin began / to cough again, in a moldy cell in Spain" while "my sweaty thighs / stuck to the varnished bench." A neighborhood boy, Stanley, would come by from a run while

> I was reading what I considered classics:
> *Anthony Adverse, The Fountainhead, Gone With the Wind.*
> Ashley was marrying Melanie, Scarlett and Rhett
> were galloping through Atlanta. Atlanta was burning.
> Stanley and I were both having trouble breathing.

Stanley, who was also a childhood poet and pianist, is now an orthodontist, and Flanders ends the poem with a beautiful mixture of humor, warmth, longing, and irony:

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> Sometimes when I look at my daughter's
> braces I think of him. On our old block
> the windows are locked now, but in those days
> they stood open wide. There were parades
> and ox-roasts and dancing in the streets,
> slow dancing in the feverous dark.

Flanders more than delivers on the reader's hope that a mature poet will demonstrate not just intelligence and fluid wordplay, but also something most of us have given up expecting from our writers: wisdom.

The world of James Schuyler's *Selected Poems*[5] divides fairly neatly into two landscapes: New York City and the rural Northeast. "I love / this garden in all its moods," Schuyler says in "Korean Mums," and that voice of celebration runs throughout his *Selected Poems*. He celebrates the garden "even under its winter coat / of salt hay, or now / in October, more than half gone over: here / a rose, there a clump / of aconite." And he delights in it, hauntingly, even though he knows that one day he will forget "this garden, the breeze / in stillness, even / the words, Korean mums." Almost invariably Schuyler is at his best when writing about nature, for which he has a sharp, unsentimental eye, while retaining the humanity and emotional warmth evident in all his poetry. But when he writes about the urban landscape or about people he knows, that same warmth lapses into sentimentality and self-indulgence. Schuyler's more recent poems are often chatty and diary-like, in the manner of Frank O'Hara, whose name is invoked a number of times. The chat is witty, erudite, and given to sudden, dazzling shifts of tone and subject. But much of the time the trivial and entertaining remains trivial and entertaining. Entertainment of this high a level is no mean feat, to be sure, but Schuyler shows in his nature poems that he is capable of much more significant writing. Schuyler's sensibility, his warmth and wit, persists in the mind longer, somehow, than the poems that embody it.

A prominent theme, perhaps *the* prominent theme, of Daniel Hoffman's *Hang-Gliding from Helicon: New and Selected Poems, 1948–1988*[6] is mutability. In his early poems there is a great concern with birth, death, decay, and rebirth: the cycles of life and the seasons. And, in "That the Pear Delights Me Now," the human desire to believe the world exists for his delight is expressly disavowed: "That the pear delighted me / is wholly incidental, / for the flower was for the fruit, / the fruit is for the seed." In Hoffman's new poems, the concern is still with change, but the emphasis is different. The older

[5] SELECTED POEMS, by *James Schuyler*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. $25.00.

[6] HANG-GLIDING FROM HELICON: New and Selected Poems, 1948–1988, by *Daniel Hoffman*. Louisiana State University Press. $15.95.

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poet, who has lived to see many of his friends and relatives die, now ponders the ability of memory to arrest time, at least for as long as the rememberer lives. In a superb poem, "A Barn Burnt in Ohio," Hoffman reflects on a barn he saw burn down forty years ago:

> In Ohio, and there among the villagers, some long dead,
> I still stand still, silhouetted by that pyre,
>
> Stand as the barn stood once while snow, a century
> Of snow swirled past its eaves, where snow, where ash,
> Executors of time's changeless will,
> Sift down, till memory lose that ruined doorsill.

Nature, though, remains a comfort in a changing world; and in "Ode to Joy," a poem rich with echoes of Keats, a litany of dead and suffering friends and acquaintances gives way at last to the "plangent repertoire" of a mockingbird, whose song cascades "from the deepest source of sorrow / To pierce the dark with momentary grace." But now, because the world itself is threatened, many of Hoffman's new poems—like "Slick," "Last Lynx," "Crack!" and the melodramatic "Halflives"—are deeply troubled by the possibility of nature's being irreparably damaged by ecological disaster, atomic war, or relentless human encroachment.

Daniel Hoffman is a poet who has needed a *Selected Poems,* because his fascination with different verse forms and styles leads him to attempt experiments that don't always work. It is good, then, to have this book because it lets Hoffman's truest accomplishments and his most deeply felt concerns—his visions—stand forth and command the attention they deserve.

Richard Wilbur is a master. After reading his *New and Collected Poems,*[7] I can think of no better word to use. In the seemingly effortless play of syntax over meter and rhyme he has few equals in our time. But the great ease, the technical mastery of his poems, sometimes laps over into the subject matter, as if to imply the world itself can be similarly mastered. This comes not from any smugness on Wilbur's part, I think, but out of his classical or neoclassical view of poetry as something constructed beautifully, as the end result of reflection and art and not, as in the romantic view, as part of the process itself. Thus, in Wilbur's poems issues seem to be settled beyond dispute. But the result is an elegance and eloquence, a love for the well-turned phrase, that is practically unique in contemporary poetry. Wilbur himself is aware of the dilemma. In "The Writer," hearing his daughter as she types a story in her room, he compares

[7] NEW AND COLLECTED POEMS, by *Richard Wilbur.* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $27.95.

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the house to a ship and the sound of the typewriter keys to "a chain hauled over a gunwale," while the "stuff" of his daughter's life is "a great cargo—and some of it heavy." Then, rather glibly, he wishes her a "lucky passage." As soon as he's completed the metaphor, however, he rejects the "easy figure" because he remembers how difficult the life of a writer can be. The next metaphor he advances is embedded in the anecdote of a "dazed starling" that once became trapped in the same room his daughter is now working in. For an hour, it pounded itself against the walls until it found its way out the window they had opened for it. The poem concludes: "It is always a matter, my darling, / Of life and death, as I had forgotten. I wish / What I had wished before, but harder." Though the poem is touching and even powerful, the implied final metaphor, and the ending of the poem, while infinitely better than the rejected first metaphor of the ship, still have a bit of its premeditated neatness about them.

But enough quibbling with the nature of Wilbur's vision. His *Collected Poems* is chock full of work of enduring value: "The Catch," "Hamlin Brook," "The Mind Reader," "A Wood," "Love Calls Us to the Things of This World," "Statues," "Beasts," "A Baroque Wall Fountain in the Villa Sciarra" (a stunning *tour de force*!), "Year's End," "The Puritans," "Grasse: The Olive Trees"—and though the list could go on and on, it must, I think, include "The Juggler." In "The Juggler" Wilbur tells us a great deal about how he views the role of the artist. The juggler juggles balls that bounce "less and less" because a ball "resents its own resilience / Falling is what it loves, and the earth falls / So in our hearts from brilliance, / Settles and is forgot." But with his artistry the juggler can "shake our gravity up":

> Whee, in the air
> The balls roll round, wheel on his wheeling hands,
> Learning the ways of lightness, alter to spheres
> Grazing his finger ends,
> Cling to their courses there,
> Swinging a small heaven about his ears.

When the juggler tires and the show ends, we applaud the performance: "For him we batter our hands / Who has won for once over the world's weight." As a juggler who triumphs over gravity and the world's weight, no one in our time is better than Richard Wilbur.

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DEAN FLOWER

The Hallucination of Landscape

On the elegant central stairway of the Mark Twain house in Hartford, Connecticut, and in the (fictional) dingy parlors of Lily Bart's cousins in *The House of Mirth* you will find the same series of engravings, copies of Thomas Cole's famous sequence of paintings, *The Voyage of Life* (1839). The engravings were enormously popular for decades, until sophisticates like Edith Wharton began satirizing them in 1905. Nowadays you may see the originals reproduced in color in almost any history of American painting, icons less of sentimental Christian piety than of Hudson River landscape painting. Color postcards of the series—*Childhood*, *Youth*, *Manhood*, and *Old Age*—may be purchased at the National Gallery in Washington, where the original oils currently hang, or for a little more money you can buy slides to take home and project on your wall.

Cole's images have long been a commodity. Taken together with his other famous sequence, *The Course of Empire* at the New York Historical Society, and with *The Expulsion from the Garden* at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and *The Oxbow (the Connecticut River near Northampton)* at the Metropolitan, Cole's work supplied a good many emblems of the American scene as it was seen—or not seen but conceived, invented—in the early stages of our national culture. But take a close look at *The Voyage of Life* or better, imagine an earnest art history student told to study these "Hudson River" paintings. How much of the actual landscape can we see? The foreground of *Childhood* has some luxuriant weeds mixed in with its pretty flowers, gigantic plantain and grotesque rhubarb they may seem, New World species perhaps but no botanist will ever identify such symbolic shrubs. Nor can Cole's river be contorted by the visual imagination into any view of the Hudson or the Connecticut. In *Youth* a huge Graeco-Roman-Taj-pagoda is envisioned, a fantasy spread out against the sky, a dream of empire perhaps. But it resembles nothing in nature, nothing in America. It's pure artifice, like nothing else in Tennessee, as Wallace Stevens might have said.

Cole's conscious theme is *sic transit gloria*. The top-heavy eclectic architectural dream will quickly disintegrate, under the pressures of time, natural fact (water, rock), and human experience. Cole chose similar extravagant constructions to dramatize the same moral in *The Course of Empire* (1836) and *The Architect's Dream* (1840): man's powers are small, and he deludes himself mightily about who's in charge. But my point is that none of Cole's constructions offer to tell us anything

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about what the American architecture or landscape actually looked like to a viewer in the 1830s and 1840s. They do not even incidentally or accidentally do that, except in a few cases, e.g., *The Oxbow*. Instead they offer preconceived constructions: allegories, projected visions, dreams of what the landscape ought to look like, and subjective nightmares of the reverse. Seemingly naturalistic subjects in Cole's work always turn out not to be. Study the darkened sky in *Voyage of Life: Manhood* and you will discern as many as three demonic faces in the clouds. Cole explained these "demon forms" as Suicide, Intemperance and Murder, "the temptations that beset men in their direst trouble."[1] Similarly, if you look carefully into the autumnal foliage of *Schroon Mountain* (1838) you will discover Indians in war paint and feathery headdresses, behind every tree (as we traditionally say). Neither wind-demons nor Indians were anything Cole had seen; he imagined them, saw them as essential to his vision of the American experience, and put them into his paintings. Ironically enough, then, Cole's impositions of meaning upon nature, of moral order upon landscape, were quite as imperialistic in their way (arbitrary, projective, preconceived) as the designs he consciously condemned.

When William Cullen Bryant addressed his sonnet "To Cole, the Painter, Departing for Europe" in 1830, he urged the painter not to allow his vision of American landscape—"that earlier, wilder image"—to be scaled down and weakened by the gentler European terrain he was about to revisit. (Significantly, Cole was born in Lancashire, and came to America when he was eighteen.) There's another nice irony in this situation, since both Bryant's idea of "that wilder image" and Cole's were of European derivation. Edmund Burke's famous *Philosophical Enquiry into . . . the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) had long defined, particularly for writers and painters, conceptions of a profound aesthetic and spiritual difference between the merely picturesque or pleasantly Beautiful and the more awesome and profound Sublime. When European art encountered American landscape, there were Burke's conceptions, ready to be used on a sufficiently grand scale at last. The "wildness" that Cole depicted in America was more than anything a preconception, shaped by European landscape conventions—partly by Claude Lorrain's somnolent pastorals with proscenium trees and partly by Salvator Rosa's tempestuous amphitheaters with lone peasant and ruins, always ruins. Of course American landscape painters did their best to study in Paris, Düsseldorf, and Rome, unfitting themselves for the task of seeing what America really looked like. They were even taught to use a "Claude-glass": a darkened mirror with convex edges which softened

[1] Louis Legrand Noble, *The Life and Works of Thomas Cole* (Cambridge, Mass.; 1853, reprint 1964), p. 216. It is interesting to conjecture why Cole considered Murder a "temptation."

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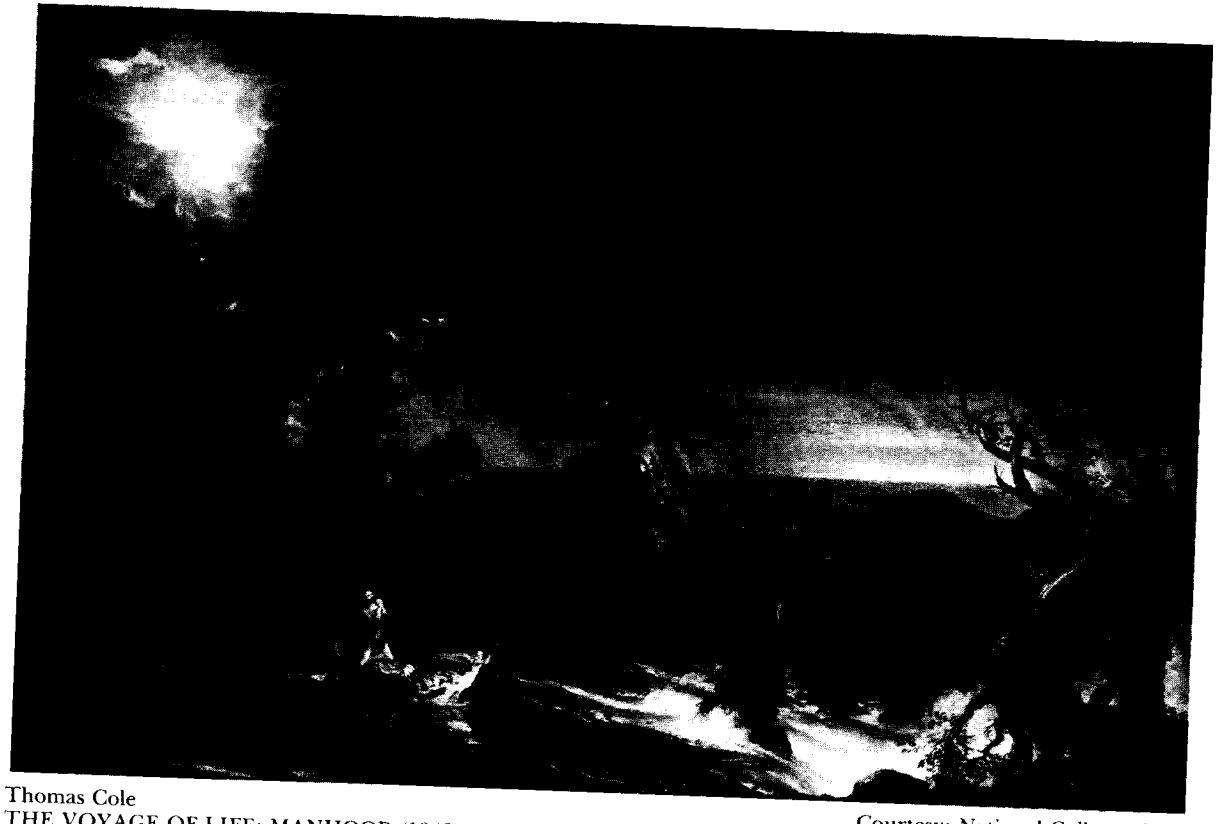

Thomas Cole
THE VOYAGE OF LIFE: MANHOOD (1842)
Oil on canvas

Courtesy: National Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.), Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund

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and tamed the view for painterly consumption. What hope was there at such a time for a disinterested glimpse of America?

Looking back at *The Voyage of Life* one hundred forty-six years after it was painted, we may discover a fable quite different from the intended one, a significantly more secular American drama. For the imagery of *Childhood* and *Youth* can be seen quite clearly to depict the Old World fantasy of America—a pastoral vision of ease and plenitude in a familiar Arcadian greensward—while *Manhood* and *Old Age* suggest shocked disillusionment, bitterness, and a welcome escape from the dark New World, which has proved to be so uncontrollable and indefinable. One can see this drama as well in Cole's much earlier *Expulsion from the Garden* (c.1827-28), where the right half of the picture, I would argue, represents the same European delusion of a New Canaan and the left half represents a more experiential, equally subjective truth—a nature violent and alien to man, drained of reassuring color, where the only reprieve is death. The picture is not of America, but it is certainly about America. Cole's familiar key signature, the blasted tree, which appears in his earliest known work, reappears throughout his career, even in his most cheerful scenes, as if to recall himself deliberately to his darkest suspicions and disillusionments. His boyhood dreams of America were blasted, these paintings tell us, and he never quite recovered from the shock.

One of Cole's least publicized American icons, *Daniel Boone and His Cabin on the Great Osage Lake* (1826, Amherst College) shows how this same disillusionment could take on a satiric bitterness. The legendary trapper-woodsman-hero is shown in old age, sitting beside that gnarled and twisted tree, bracing himself tensely, and staring—crazily, I think—at nothing. The landscape behind has its gleams of distant light and color, but the prevailing tonality of the scene is gray, bleak, washed out. So was the heroic myth of American frontiersmen, for Cole. It's easy to see why this image failed to become a popular commodity. Cooper's Natty Bumppo, for all his crankiness, remains a romantic figure compared to Cole's. The aptest parallel is rather Faulkner's Boon Hoggenbeck, inept and berserk at the end of "The Bear."

If my re-reading of Cole is anywhere near right, then he does not really belong in the Romantic movement of writers and painters (Bryant, Cooper, Emerson, Durand, Church, Bierstadt) who all celebrated the wilder images of America and tried to render them in their glory and mystery. Cole rather belongs in the Revolutionary period, where—according to a persuasive new account by Robert Lawson-Peebles[2]—most of our writers prevailingly floundered in their attempts to reconcile mythic expectations of the American landscape with the reality.

[2] LANDSCAPE AND WRITTEN EXPRESSION IN REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA, by *Robert Lawson-Peebles*. Cambridge University Press. $39.95.

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Lawson-Peebles says almost nothing about Cole and gives no thought to how his arguments might revise our conceptions of early American landscape painting. He is interested in *written* landscape, which he defines as "percept"—not earth and trees and topography but the myths and maps of places we carry in our heads. He likes Harold Rosenberg's way of putting it: "the hallucination of displaced terrain." In fact it is Rosenberg's term for this, "Redcoatism" (the British soldiers' inability to adjust to the actual American terrain), that provides the keynote of Lawson-Peebles' discussion. He argues that the sophisticated European conceptions of landscape and of language used by such figures as Benjamin Rush (a doctor), Jedediah Morse (a geographer), Noah Webster (the lexicographer) as well as by such writers as Thomas Jefferson, Charles Brockden Brown, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Henry Hugh Brackenridge, Philip Freneau, and others led them into misconceptions, abysses, and impasses, as they tried and failed to realize in the American land what they had constructed in their heads, what they hallucinated, what they willed to make true. Lawson-Peebles sees all these writers as explorers of the new American frontier, imperialists of a type who sought to define and dominate unruly American facts with their orderly designs, and confronted the very limits of the expressible. He argues that their unconscious "imperialism of the text" produces—when it fails at last, as it must—a special type of disenchantment with America, an inversion of the Edenic pastoral dream that issues in an equally false antithesis, the nightmare of a malevolent wilderness. Crowding his discussion with information from many sources—history, geography, politics, biography, aesthetics, literature—Lawson-Peebles manages to pay special attention to linguistic nuance. He wants to reveal moments where "a text fails in the face of literal inexpressibility," confounded by an American landscape it could not assimilate, moments when he claims—in perhaps his riskiest metaphor—"the text *flutters* as it approaches" the inexpressible (italics mine). That of course may be *his* hallucination. But it is an interesting and suggestive proposition.

The centerpiece of Lawson-Peebles' narrative is his account of Thomas Jefferson and Meriwether Lewis. He shows how hard Jefferson worked to bring about the Louisiana Purchase and how carefully he prepared Lewis as "his lieutenant" to carry out the task of exploring, mapping, and so taking possession of this vast new territory. Lawson-Peebles rightly emphasizes how Jefferson was in every sense the architect of this enterprise. It was of course the neo-classic architecture of an agrarian, a Deist, and an aristocratic gentleman thoroughly educated in the Enlightenment. Jefferson saw to the education of Meriwether Lewis himself, keeping the idealistic young man at Monticello for three years of indoctrination. Once the expedition was underway, Lewis began to disintegrate under the intolerable pressure of "discovering" in the West the sort of landscape that Jefferson had preconceived for him. William Clark, by contrast,

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had no such trouble, but he was pragmatic and lacked Lewis' special education and high-flown expectations. It's a grim but fascinating story. Lawson-Peebles shows by close examination of the language in Lewis' journal how he sought to record fertile gardens and comfortable roads and the promise of an easy Northwest Passage, and how he was attacked by cougars and bears, by thunderstorms and hail, halted by unnavigable rivers and seemingly endless mountain ranges of the most daunting altitudes. As the trip wore on, Lewis wrote less and less, and then could write no more. He felt no *frisson* of the Sublime, no explorer's elation, no Jeffersonian scientific curiosity, only toward the end suspicion, anger and despair. Others called his hatred of the Indians "pathological" and reported him on occasion drunk and suicidal. Upon his return Lewis refused to publish any of his writing, despite the strongest encouragements, and his early death under mysterious circumstances was probably the result of self-inflicted gunshot wounds.

Lawson-Peebles finds a similar paradigm in the career of Charles Brockden Brown, whose third novel, *Edgar Huntley, Or Memoirs of a Sleep Walker* (1799), is seen to parallel Meriwether Lewis' traumatic descent into unknowable frontiers and unbearable self-scrutiny. After writing that novel, Lawson-Peebles claims, Brown retreated to safer ground, abandoning the bold explorations he had launched in *Wieland* and *Arthur Mervyn*. Lawson-Peebles made me re-read the lurid chapters 15-17 of *Edgar Huntley*, and although he convinced me that the novel reflects much ambivalence about the exploration of the American West, I was more impressed by Brown's continuing obsession with Lockeian psychology, his capacity to investigate the minute processes of self-deception, than I was with any landscape it may contain. In fact Lawson-Peebles' study is far more successful as a history of ideas about landscape in the Revolutionary era than it is as a fresh reading of its literature.

The argument breaks down when Lawson-Peebles tries to claim too much. In an epilogue on Edgar Allan Poe, he argues that *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* reflects the same traumatic confrontation with an inexpressible frontier, but is unable to reconcile any of Poe's subsequent writing with this theory, despite good proofs that Poe knew much about current frontier literature. That Poe parodied and played with these materials hardly makes for any confused or frightened fluttering of the text. Lawson-Peebles never confronts the question of whether the crises he describes in each writer are caused by America's unique topography, as he claims, or whether they are just the result of the inevitable foundering of European neo-classicism, which was afoot in more regions than the American frontier. Nor does Lawson-Peebles convince me that, in this period more than others, the American landscape is uniquely resistant to words, ordering schemes, or imperial texts. In what era has language *not* in some way called attention to its limits? When have writers *not*

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driven themselves into recognitions of the ineffable and inexpressible? When have there *not* been imperial texts at odds with the actual? Doesn't Lawson-Peebles remember Don Quixote? And after all, when do those who strive hardest to see the landscape *not* still carry their preconceptions around in their heads? Lawson-Peebles seems not to have appreciated Harold Rosenberg's full irony in quoting the line, "People carry their landscapes with them, the way travelers used to cart along their porcelain chamber pots." Astonishingly, Lawson-Peebles may not have read or found appropriate to his subject E. H. Gombrich's *Art and Illusion.*

Still Lawson-Peebles has interestingly documented the energy with which American writers in this era strove—and failed—to see the landscapes they wanted to see. He shows how the apparent novelty and plasticity of the American environment invited many a leading intellectual to "play the role of designer." Thinking themselves empiricists and enlightened observers, they proved in fact to be rigid formalists and bookish prescribers, uninterested in objective vision. As Lawson-Peebles puts it, "The lined walls of the library provided the fortress from which America would be ordered." If that is to some extent always true, it was poignantly so in the early decades of the American nation. When Thomas Cole came to paint his cautionary fables, *The Course of Empire* and *The Voyage of Life*, he thought only to offer traditional Christian lessons about the vainglorious dreams of empire builders and the illusions of personal power and control. But Cole's deeper personal experience, encoded in all those familiar American images, was like Meriwether Lewis': there was no refuge or asylum in the American landscape. The voyage of life was beset by demons at every turn, and the only release was death. It's a curiously melodramatic, even adolescent reaction, when the comforting dream of the Promised Land was yanked away. And it's even more curious to see how long we have continued in America to see things this way.

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ROBERT GARIS

Fiction Chronicle

NOVELS WITH AN UNUSUAL PROVENANCE have a lot of interest going for them before you start reading them. The suppression of Anatoli Rybakov's *Children of the Arbat*[1] in the Soviet Union for over twenty years guaranteed it attention when it finally emerged, and Rybakov's subject certainly is the meaty one you expected: what it was like in the Soviet Union just before the assassination of Kirov in 1934, which Stalin not only probably ordered but then used as a pretext for the terror of the Moscow Trials. Exciting material, but Rybakov's novel turns out to be a flat experience, perhaps because Rybakov simply isn't a very gifted writer. But there are indications that gray, uninflected ordinariness represents a deliberate literary, moral and political ideal. The structure is routine—two interwoven lines of action, one big and the other small—Stalin moves toward the decision about Kirov on the big stage, while on the small stage a milder injustice plays itself out, as Sasha Pancratov, an attractive, energetic and idealistic student and active member of Komsomol, the Young Communist League, is unjustly accused of anti-Party behavior and exiled to Siberia. But these actions don't differ from each other enough; Stalin and Pancratov think and act in the same step-by-step tempo, the same bare texture, the same uninflected tone, so that the double action, instead of exploring the operations of power from different aspects, Western style, amounts only to a redundant confirmation of a general argument that human nature is not only the same everywhere, but is very easily known and described. Rybakov seems to want to make Stalin's crimes as unexciting as possible and as accessible to ordinary understanding. He isn't aiming at high expressivity but at level-headed cataloguing, as if high expressivity might be a political error.

Another way of saying all this is that there isn't a hint about paranoia in the novel; still another is that we are encountering Soviet realism in a surprising place. It's not that I particularly want to read anything more about paranoia, but that it's pointless to meet Stalin in a world in which perverse and extreme behavior doesn't exist. When Balanchine returned to Russia in 1962 for the first time after he had left in 1924, what depressed him most was the disappearance of "good Russian": the correctness and nuance that had characterized the speech of a cultivated person in 1924 had vanished and the

[1] CHILDREN OF THE ARBAT, by *Anatoli Rybakov*. Trans. by *Harold Chukman*. Little, Brown. $19.95.

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culture had lost a whole dimension. And in Rybakov's account of Stalin I feel something of the same; whole sections of the lexicon of human behavior are missing.

The drama of moral conflict seems a lost art, too, or perhaps just too subjective, too dangerously far from the public world of action. There's dramatic promise in the character of Sasha's uncle, Mark Alexandrovich Ryasanov, a highly placed, successful and sympathetic official in the industrial sector, who is concerned about Sasha's predicament and feels some impulse to do something about it, but in fact does almost nothing. The novel explains his failure clearly—it's the self-interest of an ambitious man—but Rybakov's way of handling the episode doesn't even attempt the tension of moral drama, and the whole character is wasted. The book's logic implies that Ryasanov too will be destroyed by Stalin in due course, but here too a kind of censorship comes into play, and Rybakov underplays this irony into invisibility. Rybakov might have thought he was writing a Soviet version of Hannah Arendt's *The Banality of Evil*, except that he doesn't seem to be aiming at paradox, only earnest explanation.

Rybakov is at his best in an episode toward the end, when Stalin gets a toothache at his dacha and Lipman, a prominent Jewish dentist from Moscow, is sent for. Stalin admires Lipman's quiet, delicate efficiency, but when Lipman wants to install a plastic plate rather than replace the heavy gold one Stalin has been using, Stalin stubbornly chooses the old way. The work is done so quickly, in order not to waste the great man's time, that complications arise which Stalin's subalterns are afraid to tell him the truth about; but the great man's mastery of detail discovers them anyway and he preaches an emphatic sermon about not being lied to. When Lipman brings the new gold plate, he also brings a plastic plate which he has worked overtime to prepare; he persuades Stalin to try it for a day, Stalin finds it more comfortable than the gold plate, and agrees to use it permanently. Afterwards, Stalin contrives a carefully exact punishment for Lipman's opposition to his will: " 'Replace the dentist Lipman with someone else.' After a moment he added: 'He should be released from the Kremlin hospital, but he should not be touched.' " It's a nice invention, but in the context of Rybakov's whole method Stalin's systematic injustice becomes little more than a crotchet of stubbornness, certainly not a symptom of monstrosity.

The technical sophistication of the Chilean novelist José Donoso, who has lived for years in France and the United States, shows itself in the high style of his handling of an expertly contrived symbolic subject. There are advantages and disadvantages to such sophistication. *Curfew*[2] takes place between the wake and the funeral of Pablo

[2] CURFEW, by *José Donoso*. Trans. by *Alfred MacAdam*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson. $18.95.

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Neruda's widow, Matilde, an important enough cultural and political event to justify the presence of many pointedly representative characters of the Chilean political scene, including the central figure, Mañungo Vera, a directionless and slightly over-the-hill superstar activist pop singer, who has just returned to Chile from Paris after thirteen years of exile. He has enacted the radical will so often and with such success that his whole identity has come to seem to him a humiliating anachronism, his fame an embarrassment. All the characters are just as highly colored, if not through their talent, breeding, money and political power, then through that grotesquerie that has become a trademark of Latin American fiction. Donoso's wide spectrum of Chilean political attitudes is explicitly emblematic but intelligent enough to generate interest, if not large easy belief; political and characterizational nuances are compactly rendered, and everything gathers together into a distinctive political ambience. If the whole thing is a kind of contraption, craft rather than vision, nevertheless there are better and worse contraptions, and Donoso always comes across as a professional, though in this novel he's often straining his imagination pretty hard.

Latin American novelists today seem to be able to manage serious political fiction through sheer placement in time and space—outside the mainstream of Euro-American political history, but inside a rich mix and a crowded history of political opinion and event, always relevant to the mainstream and intersecting it in freshly illuminating ways. These novelists have an abundant, almost weary familiarity with all kinds of political behavior, they have passed through too many disillusionments for easy hopefulness, yet they are still drawn to serious imaginative thinking about politics. And their eclectic fluency in Western European and American culture yields an interesting hybrid of twentieth-century activism and alienation, in which an occasional touch of provinciality is far from a disadvantage; there's a distinctive aroma to their fictional world of politics, and they believe in large-scale action enough to register it with conviction.

The political climate of *Curfew* is the torpid half-life of contemporary Chile, where Pinochet's regime has survived internal activist opposition and international censure to become a harsh but not quite intolerably repressive modus vivendi, in which Donoso's characters seem to be caught sleepwalking in blurred phases of personal and political development. This is clearly true of Mañungo Vera, but even more characteristic of the woman with whom he becomes involved in the central action of the novel. Judit Torre, thirty-fivish, elegantly beautiful, aristocratic, once deeply involved in Maoist-like guerrilla action, is now under an obsession that began as politics but has reached the intensity of identity crisis. She had been one of five women who were raped and tortured by the police, except that in her case the rape didn't take place because of the impotence of her captor, about whom she remembers only his nasal voice and the moist hand

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he placed on her knee. Because she has suppressed the fact that she was not in fact raped, she believes that she has claimed a martyrdom she doesn't deserve; her whole life has become a vaguely expiatory, vaguely vengeful search for this voice and this hand, helped by an ubiquitous legless man on a skateboard, a Dickensian grosteque who seems to reflect the mode of her former political life. Judit and Mañungo, who had known each other much earlier, now reach out to understand each other across their different kinds of alienation. Their discussions about love and politics don't always escape banality, but often they reach real political dialectic. Judit releases herself from her obsession by guerrilla theatre: in horror she shoots a bitch in heat who is being clumsily and cruelly besieged by the male dogs she has attracted; she then carries the dead dog about with her like a saint's badge until the dog and what it represents loses its hold over her. Mañungo makes the choice to remain in Chile with Judit through watching the death under torture of an activist friend/enemy from the old days named Lopito. This climactic event is ripe with bizarre artifice and its claims on our emotions are all suspect—Lopito's wild satiric violence when drunk, his painful love for his supremely ugly daughter Lopita—a veritable Quasimoda—who arouses the laughter of the policemen who are arresting him: all go to form an action too contrived to support securely the large action and meaning it's asked to. Donoso's bold strokes are often disfigured by this theatricality, yet his sheer knowledgeability and intelligence almost always make me go along with his straining imagination. In the present instance all the elements of the scene had gathered a strong charge by the time they coalesced, and the theatrics worked.

The cultural eclectism Donoso shares with his peers lets him reflect in an attractive way the power and imagery of the great European films of the fifties and sixties. Puig's camp about movie stars isn't something I much care for. but I feel affectionate comradeship for the influence of Antonioni on *Curfew*, which is almost an homage to Monica Vitti. Judit's over-charged, obscurely but irresistibly demanding temperament doesn't quite match Claudia's in *L'Avventura* or Vittoria's in *L'Eclisse*, because the novelist's denser textures and sheer factual accumulations preclude the precision of imagery and held-back rhythm on which Antonioni's film language depends. But there's a hard-won sincerity in all these characters, a rarity in any art, particularly in the gamy style in which Donoso too elaborately but very intelligently works.

Though Doris Lessing was seduced for a while by a mode of science fiction that emptied her writing of all complexity, her great gift is for the subtle complexities of the plain style, of which she has been one of the world masters for some forty years. When this style attempts

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parable- or fable-like spareness, as in *The Fifth Child*,[3] it can perform more naturally than a more elaborate mode, because it is giving up less, and right from the beginning of this short and horrifying novella you feel the security of being in the right hands.

Lessing's fable is about the birth of some kind of monster to a young couple who have almost miraculously succeeded in turning the quietly determined, slightly prim ideal of family happiness, which has brought them together, into real abundance, warmth and hospitality. David and Harriet have bought a house that's too big for them and too long a commute from David's work, and without quite intending to they have had four children in quick succession. They look at each other half-guiltily about all this, but they have no cause to worry and aren't in fact worried; David's rich divorced father helps with the mortgage, Harriet's capable widowed mother helps with the children. Their most expressive choice about how to live is the first piece of furniture they bought, a huge oak dining table which by its very nature asks to be the center of abundant life; it seems spontaneously to generate the festivities that become their special custom, housefuls of children, relatives and guests over Christmas and Easter, enjoying a warmth and life that Lessing's easy style makes seem as wonderful as she means them to be.

And then, despite serious precautions this time, Ben, the fifth child, appears. Long before delivery he has announced his nature by violent prenatal movements; his brutally, even hostilely violent appetite seriously bruises Harriet's breasts; and from that point on everything indicates that he is unsocializable—he learns by imitating his brothers' and sisters' behavior, but only for a sort of protective coloration. The general attitude toward him crystallizes swiftly. Everybody except his mother decides that he must be institutionalized; they can do this without "naming" what's wrong with the child. But this exemption is impossible for Harriet, who becomes almost hysterically anxious to have the child's abnormality named by some official agent of human society, and increasingly isolated in her sense that she is regarded as a criminal by everybody around her, not exactly to blame but inextricably tied to the disgust and fear Ben arouses in everybody. Eventually she consents to institutionalization, but soon after is driven by a mixture of instinctive protectiveness and a learned ethic of duty to visit the child. She cannot bear the sight of Ben heavily sedated, tied up in a straitjacket, his cell smeared with his own excrement, and she cannot resist taking him back home. Then, in a development truly painful to read, she becomes the scapegoat of her little society: by destroying with Ben's presence the unity she had helped create, she has become in fact the "criminal" she has felt herself accused of being. At the end Ben becomes the aloof, dissociated but feared leader of a

[3] THE FIFTH CHILD, by *Doris Lessing*. Alfred A. Knopf. $16.95.

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gang of delinquent boys at his public school, and as the novel ends, Harriet is expecting him and his gang to move to the excitement and violence of London. Family happiness never returns.

Many explanations for Ben's existence are suggested by various characters—words like "troll" and "goblin" are tried out—but the most fully developed comes naturally from the person who has the most stake in understanding, Harriet: "She felt she was looking, through him, at a race that reached its apex thousands and thousands of years before humanity . . . Did his people rape the females of humanity's forebears? Thus making new races, which had flourished and departed, but perhaps had left their seeds in the human matrix." This weak part of the book is unfortunately important, since it's impossible not to want to name Ben too. We'd like to switch off that need but we can't, and no better names than Harriet's come to mind. This is probably the reason serious writers avoid this kind of subject. Yet Lessing's marvelous experienced eye and ear for human attitudes toward the unacceptable make the book important. *The Fifth Child* would be worth reading just for its account of the making of a scapegoat: we see perfectly why the little society can't handle the tension between loyalty and repulsion that Ben sets up and we watch Harriet choosing her fate with a clear-eyed kind of sick sympathy and fear.

International high style at its most stupefyingly relentless is the achievement of Kobo Abe's *The Ark Sakura*,[4] which lays out the ingredients for some sort of fable about the nuclear age or human survival or paranoia, and then shuts down without putting anything together. The first-person narrator named Mole (also Pig, a nickname he dislikes) is looking for people to joint him in his survival "ship," a many-chambered abandoned underground quarry in which his father had once imprisoned him as a punishment, but which he has now fitted out with all sorts of provisions, boobytraps against intruders and the like, as an "ark" for survival. The quarry's main feature is a huge toilet, with no seat and with immense water pressure in the flushing mechanism which makes it very inconvenient to use—it was this toilet to which his father had tied him. The candidates for survival Mole gathers (with no particular criteria) are an insect seller at a bazaar and a man and a woman who work as shills for him and whose animated conversation about one of the insects attracts Mole's interest. This insect, an eupcaccia, feeds entirely on its own feces, moving in a perfect circle just slowly enough to keep its nutritional system functioning smoothly, except during its mating season, when it rises precariously from its circle on flimsy wings, and then "time stands still." Once Mole and his three recruits enter the Ark, there is a steady,

[4] THE ARK SAKURA, by *Kobo Abe*. Trans. by *Juliet Winters Carpenter*. Alfred A. Knopf. $18.95.

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boring action of exploration of the place itself, temporary disappearances of the male shill and the insect seller, much searching for them, suspicions that other people are hiding in the quarry, much searching for them too. Both the shill and the woman tell Mole that the other has cancer but doesn't know it. Two thirds of the way through, emissaries arrive from a group of old people called the Broom Brigade, who hope to survive in the "Kingdom of Quintessential Castoffs." In the meantime, they serve as garbage-collectors. But they have contracted out their most dangerous product, poisonous industrial wastes, to Mole and his huge toilet, and now they want him to destroy a human body for them. In the last hundred pages the action speeds up; Mole gets his leg stuck in the toilet, from which he finally releases himself by setting off an explosion which changes the pressure in the water system. He tells the other characters that the explosion is a nuclear explosion, that nuclear warfare has begun; when he afterwards tells them the truth, they prefer to believe the nuclear explanation, and when Mole leaves them behind in the Ark, he finds that the world, including his own body, has become transparent.

These are the ingredients, but no fable emerges. "Sakura" is the Japanese word for "shill": is Mole's survival ship a fake that manipulates people who are obsessed with nuclear disaster? You don't feel this as you read, and all the characters in the novel bring a kind of bland steadiness of attention to everything they do, without feeling obsessed or victimized, and you don't feel any irony about that. Apart from Mole's pleasure in little flesh contacts he makes with the flesh of the woman shill, particularly with her thighs or buttocks, and his pain when his leg is stuck in the toilet, the entire action is rendered without affect. None of the meanings promised in the action are made by the kind of connective process we are used to encountering when meaning happens. The strange insect, much discussed at the beginning of the novel, completely disappears, and we aren't given the wherewithal to connect any person or act with the insect's overmeaningful habits. Loud elements such as Mole's father's having chained him to the toilet for punishment, and the steady emphasis on the toilet and on excrement, seem continually on the verge of working up some meaning but remain inert; when we learn about Mole's job of disposing of industrial pollution, and eventually of disposing of a human body, our sense of being right on top of meaning without seeing it or feeling it generates an almost eerie emptiness which the book doesn't in any way register. The transparent outside world makes a very striking appearance formally, in a single-page final chapter, but the prose doesn't reveal either by tone or imagery what transparency means. And so on.

It is hard to guess what the novel would seem like to somebody without a reviewer's obligation to continue reading. Readers who have admired Kobo Abe in the past might find a positive value in what I

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experienced as negative: since the novel's consistent *moderato* narrative drive doesn't produce any meaning to distract us, it does bring that element of fiction—movement in time—to sharp focus. And I suppose it's possible to admire the odd skill with which Abe does in fact avoid meaningfulness—his foot never slips. When I had seen the film made from Abe's first novel, *Woman of the Dunes*, a highly regarded, portentously meaningful fable about some mysteries of sexuality, I read the novel itself to check whether the film had coarsened Abe's meaning and found that it hadn't. Abe's progress, which has led him to ever sterner renunciations of the conventional, has established him in a high place in the international literary scene. Other reviewers of this latest novel hint at the marvelous but ineffable experience they have had. For this reader there was nothing.

William Kennedy, in *Quinn's Book*,[5] imitates John Barth in trying to broaden the canon with old-time yarns and tall stories stretched out to novel length. Barth is funnier than Kennedy, which makes Kennedy's book all the sadder. Joyce can hold your attention through hundreds of pages of systematized parody, but it's an oddly difficult art, in which nobody else has succeeded. A dangerous art, too, because failure in this kind of writing looks more gratuitous than other kinds.

Love in the Time of Cholera,[6] an irresistibly likeable opera buffa, has converted me to Marquez. I could manage only a third of *A Hundred Years of Solitude* before its incessant charm got on my nerves, and there's plenty of charm in the latest book, but this time I liked it. It's Marquez's newly intricate and varied pacing that makes the difference, I think. There's a slower ebb and flow to his luxuriously ornate meandering prose of description, memory, meditation; a more delicately sparing hand with the jokes and the grotesquerie; the self-indulgence has a kind of gravity that keeps it from being self-regarding; and the self-indulgence itself now has a powerful dramatic pretext in Marquez's constant concern with old age in this new book, which gives a new poignancy to his sumptuous fantasy. That it's a love story goes without saying, though that understates things a bit. Fiorentino Ariza, long before the turn of the century, conceives a "cataclysmic" passion for Fermina Daza, who returns it: the affair takes place almost entirely in letters. In a sudden stroke of clear-headedness, Fermina sees him as the loser and creep he seems to the world to be and she breaks the affair off. She is then wooed and won by the city's most eligible bachelor, Dr. Juvenal Urbino, and much of the book is about their fifty-year marriage. Fiorentino's love endures; he remains unmarried (though involved in an extraordinary number

[5] QUINN'S BOOK, by *William Kennedy*. Viking. $18.95.

[6] LOVE IN THE TIME OF CHOLERA, by *Gabriel Garcia Marquez*. Trans. by *Edith Grossman*. Alfred A. Knopf. $18.95.

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of affairs—for despite his unprepossessing appearance, women find him irresistible because they instantly see that he is entirely given over to the passion of love; many of these affairs are described with full detail and great wit). When Urbino dies fifty years later, Fiorentino instantly renews his suit, is rejected again in fury, then woos and wins Fermina again; in the end they find a way to keep their love eternal by sailing up and down the Magdalena River with the cholera flag flying so that they can't land anywhere.

These characters live in the most sumptuous of fantasy worlds, for Marquez continues to be an endlessly inventive decorator—of clothes, furniture, books, houses, landscape, weather. In the middle of these furnishings, everybody is completely given over to passion—love or rage, it matters little; their lives are filled to the brim with emotion, and one emotion can change instantly into its opposite. The hedonism of *Love in the Time of Cholera* is robust, energetic and meditative; it finds love funny and absurd but endlessly interesting because love and rage are all there is, except death, which is funny and absurd too in its sad way. You might resent the absence of anything else—politics, ideas—if you weren't so envious of the rich living that goes on in Marquez's world.

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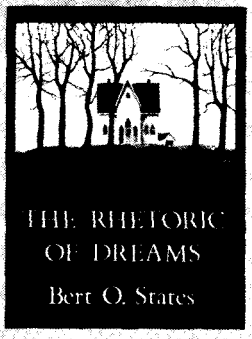

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C O R N E L L

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IN THIS ISSUE:

You can go bowling in Beijing nowadays. There's even a word for it in Chinese—Bao Ling—a phoneticization that translates roughly as "maintaining age." You perform this odd form of age maintenance at the Bowling Center of the Lido Hotel, now the Holiday Inn-Lido Hotel, on Jichang Road. The place is often crowded with prosperous locals, decked out in their rented rubber-soled shoes and Hong Kong polo shirts open at the neck. Sitting in a molded plastic seat, watching a bowler contort this way and that to guide a just-thrown ball into the proper path, you can almost imagine yourself at the 9W lanes in Englewood, New Jersey—or anywhere else, for that matter.

—Gary Krist, "Letter from Beijing," p. 602.

He walked through seven cars to the end of the train, then started back. Three cars from the end the aisle was blocked by three brown uniformed Federales. One held his rifle at the ready while another entered the compartment of two long-haired American teenagers. A fat hatless soldier with a pock-marked face and sergeant's stripes on his shirt sleeve stood in the doorway of the compartment. As Jack stopped to watch the scared teenagers were brought out into the aisle and forced to kneel down facing the wall. Jack felt an overwhelming impulse to turn around and run. *No*, he told himself, *don't run*.

—Robert McDowell, "A Trip to Mexico," p. 645.

Moreover, psychoanalysis appeared at a time when conventional religious belief was declining. Freud always denied that psychoanalysis provided a *Weltanschauung*, and claimed that he looked at the world through the eyes of a scientist. Yet all except a few fundamentalists agree that psychoanalysis is far from being a science, since its theories cannot be used for prediction and are difficult to validate by scientific methods. By taking psychoanalysis outside the physician's office, Freud himself contributed to making it into a system which not only explained the various forms of mental illness, but also applied to art, literature, humor, religion, and social structure. In an age in which many found themselves feeling rootless and insecure, psychoanalysis offered a secular belief system which was bound to appeal to those who had abandoned the old faiths.

—Anthony Storr, "Freud Revisited," p. 723.

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